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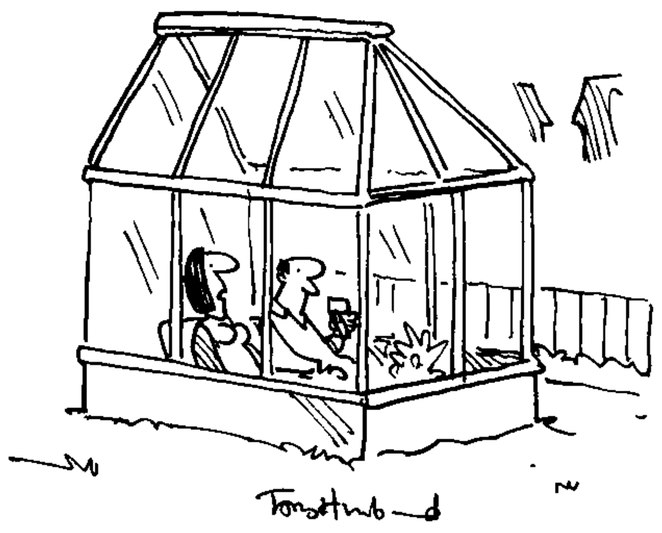
I would like to congratulate the government for its sensible and timely response to the growing problem of alcohol-related violence amongst young persons.

The government rightly banned supermarkets such as ourselves from making "3 for 2" discount offers on alcoholic beverages.

We are cooperating fully with this initiative and have terminated all such offers on extra strong Spanish cider, 100% proof Belarus lager and El Scorchero Mexican red wine (with a dash of tequila).

From now on our customers will instead be offered a "5 for 1" deal on all the above items. Yes, that's five for the price of one! Have we been drinking? No, but you will!

Happy Pissedmas from Gnomeco!



"Don't get me wrong, I really like the conservatory, I just wish we had a house to go with it"

We take the Mick

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WHAT short memories they have at the leaky Home Office!

While Gordon Brown in opposition was happy to capitalise on leaks from the trade and Treasury departments, his boss Tony Blair liked to cite the odd Home Office leak to embarrass the beleaguered prime minister, John Major. In April 1996, for example, Blair used leaked Home Office minutes of a meeting to show that, contrary to Tory claims, crime had been consistently rising.

Jack Straw, as shadow home secretary, was also at it. He seized on leaked plans to take young offenders on adventure holidays in Wales as part of the then home secretary Michael Howard's proposed military "boot camp" training. "This is nothing like the boot camps I have seen in America and which Mr Howard has promised. Sounds more like a slipper camp," said the witty Mr Straw.

Compare this to the high moral tone taken by the current home secretary, Jacqui Smith, who says that capitalising on "systemic" leaks rather than condemning them would now render the miscreant "unfit for high office".

During the final Tory years – and much to Labour's delight – the Home Office was then so leaky that documents poured out of every part – prisons, research, criminal justice, and not just the immigration department about which she now whinges. And unlike the "systemic" leaks that have caused her nothing more than embarrassment, some under the Tory administration did indeed involve national security – such as plans in 1995 to save money by cutting back on security at key Whitehall buildings.

In fact 1995 was dubbed the "year of the leak", with civil servants across Whitehall falling over themselves to hand over documents to the opposition. The cross-party European Forum found there had been 38 significant breaches, with the home office and transport department handing over most. It got so bad that even internal reports on how to plug leaks were, er, leaked!

THE catalogue of errors that let Baby P fall through society's safety nets has reopened the debate on ContactPoint, the controversial computer database that is set to hold details of all 11m children in England (*Eye* 1219) and is due to go live in parts of the country next month.

ContactPoint was the government's answer to the horrific murder in 2000 of eight-year-old Victoria Climbie, who – like Baby P – died on Haringey council's watch. Its aim is to make it easier for those involved with children to share concerns and information about their welfare.

Amid recent hand-wringing, however, little was made of the government's track record in "losing" confidential data or the risks posed to children by having their addresses, schools and other sensitive data available to tens of thousands of public-sector workers.

The *Eye* has already reported concerns over plans to allow 330,000 people access to the database. But it seems the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has been understating the numbers of council, health, schools, courts and police staff who will have access. Hidden in written answers in parliament two weeks ago was the news that the figure could be as high as 480,000.

WHY did *Newsnight* invite grim ex-Communist Beatrix Campbell to discuss the conviction of Karen Matthews for kidnapping her own daughter? Answer: Bea is the programme's go-to pundit for any stories involving northern working-class women, as the nation's foremost authority on the subject.

Anyone who doubts her expertise should study a column she wrote for the *Guardian* on 14 March, immediately after Shannon Matthews's reappearance. Campbell's main point was the contrast between the ghastly parents of Madeleine McCann – not only "neglectful" but also "middle class" – and Shannon Matthews's salt-of-the-earth family, poor but honest, who had "displayed remarkable resourcefulness" and were now throwing a street-party to celebrate her return.

Unlike the McCanns, who left their children unsupervised while scoffing tapas, "Karen Matthews has acted appropriately throughout: she was waiting for Shannon at home; she contacted the police as soon as she had exhausted all the obvious locations. And yet, our eye is drawn to her poverty, numbers of partners, cans of lager going into her household. Everything about Ms Matthews's life has been up for scrutiny."

And so Bea reached her moving peroration: "No one thought Karen Matthews had abducted or killed her daughter – and yet she has been judged. Some commentators think they can say anything they like about this woman and even to her. She has spoken with reticent dignity, yet her class makes her available for blame. The McCanns are official suspects. And yet – unlike Karen Matthews – they are presumed innocent."

● *Fleet Street's Shannon fodder: Hackwatch p.5*

A NATIONAL Audit Office report on CDC, formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation, confirms what *Eye* readers have long known: the taxpayer-owned fund set up to alleviate poverty in developing countries has become a law unto itself, to the vast and unjust enrichment of its bosses.

Chief executive Richard Laing's exorbitant £1m pay – first revealed in *Eye* 1205 nine months ago and now dubbed "ridiculous" by public accounts committee chairman Edward Leigh – looks especially dubious.

In 2004 the Department for International Development (DfID) set a pay framework which involved comparing Laing's and other executives' packages with private equity fund managers, pension fund managers and executives of other international development funds (where pay is much lower). This, as Laing knew full well, was itself a deliberately generous arrangement. But over the following years, he and his board changed the comparator group to just one element – and it was, surprise surprise, the private equity fund managers who earn millions! Bonuses became more based on financial results than development effectiveness, "without reference to DfID".

● *See Tax and bend: In the Back, p. 26*

Unwarranted Attack

"I was only obeying order, order, orders"

Street Of Shame

THE *Indescribablybroke* pleads poverty as the reason for laying off staff and relocating its office to a cubbyhole in the *Mail* building. But it clearly has a few quid left to spend on good causes.

The latest list of political donations issued by the Electoral Commission reveals that Independent Newspapers (UK) Ltd, owners of the *Indie* and *Sindie*, gave £46,000 to the Labour Party in August. Perhaps recalling its old advertising slogan – "It is. Are you?" – the company also donated £3,200 to the Lib Dems. But even-handedness has its limits: the Tories didn't get a penny.

IT'S been hard to miss Professor Richard Portes in recent weeks. From the *New York Times* to the *Financial Times*, the professor of economics at the London Business School is always ready with a comment.

"Crises offer opportunities," he wrote last month, "not only to clever investors, but to reform-minded politicians. Political leaders can seize the day and lead the reforms, with academics providing ideas."

Academics such as himself, presumably. One thing Portes hasn't mentioned lately, however, is a report he wrote just a year ago on "the internationalisation of Iceland's financial sector", which was commissioned by the country's chamber of commerce. It was launched at a banquet in London attended by the Icelandic prime minister and 200 other grandees.

"The Icelandic banks," he told the guests, "have exploited strong competitive advantages to expand at a remarkable rate over the past five years, most of this in northern Europe, including the UK. They are highly resilient, as shown in their response to the shock of early 2006 and their stability in the current financial turmoil. The current risk premium on Icelandic banks is excessive relative to their risk exposure and in comparison with their Nordic peers... The internationalisation of the Icelandic financial sector is an exceptional success story that the markets should better acknowledge."

If the *Times* requires a stand-in the next time Anatole Kaletsky and Mystic Mogg go on holiday, it need look no further.

UN peacekeepers are being dispatched to Westminster to separate the combatants in a vicious handbag-fight between Tory hack Paul Staines, who writes the Guido Fawkes blog, and Tory hack Andrew Pierce, associate editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Staines, it seems, suspects the *Telegraph* man of nicking his stories. "I know you have built your career on being a thieving cunt," he wrote to Pierce, "but if you steal from me again without credit and pass it off as your own work one more time you will regret it. Clear?"

"What did I steal from you?" asked the puzzled hack. "I haven't written any political stuff today... And I haven't looked at your website for months." To which Staines sent the brief riposte: "Fuck off."

Pierce then called Staines "pitiful", and pointed out that if he was referring to a *Telegraph* story about Gordon Brown and Lehman Brothers "it's on the first page of *Private Eye* today".

"So you nicked it from *Private Eye*?" Staines fired back. "Still makes you a thieving cunt." Oddly enough, Pierce seemed to concede the point: "Yes. *Private Eye* not your website, which last time I looked in 2006 was about as ugly as your boorish, immature threats." To which Staines replied: "'Ugly' is not a word you, of all people, should throw around."

Boys! *Boys!*

SACKWATCH

The Telegraph

IT'S the season of goodwill, which can mean only one thing at the *Telegraph* – P45s all round. The management wants to get rid of 50 jobs before Christmas, and editorial director Richard Ellis – known to admiring subordinates as "a cunt in cunt's clothing" – has set to work with a vengeance.

On the Friday before last he sacked obituaries editor Andrew McKie, explaining that a reorganisation of departments meant that McKie's role was now redundant. By Monday, however, *Telegraph* hack Harry de Quetteville was in his chair. Puzzled hacks have been told that de Quetteville's job is quite different: he is in charge of not only obits but also, er, the Court and Social column – not the most taxing of duties. Then Ellis sacked literary editor Sam Leith, explaining that his job was also now otiose. By the end of the week veteran hack Brian MacArthur had taken his place – though again disguised with a different title.

Another executive who has made an energetic start in carrying out the cull is Mark "Skippy" Skipworth, executive editor of Sport. Skippy was brought over earlier in the year from the *Sunday Times*, where he had been news editor, and his knowledge of sport is about on a par with that of Sally Jockstrap, as is now becoming apparent. Six months after ditching Sue Mott, who was too closely associated with the *ancien regime* – she lives with former sports editor David Welch – and hiring Alison Kervin as the paper's chief sports interviewer, Skippy has now sent Kervin on her way and got rid of feature-writer Martin Johnson, who is understood to be considering constructive dismissal.

At least Johnson was given the news in person. *Sunday Telegraph* tennis reporter Clive White only found out he was surplus to requirements when he had an email from the accounts department informing him that since he was no longer employed by the company, he would have to return his mobile and laptop.

Last Thursday a further eight Sport staff were shown the revolving door, including experienced golf correspondent Lewine Mair and athletics correspondent Tom Knight. Their equivalents on the Sunday paper will be expected to pick up the slack.

Skippy's long-term plan seems to be to build up a cadre of hungry young hacks who can dig up sports news stories for the digital age. Among these is Rory Smith, who in a front-page scoop for the Sunday paper in October claimed that "Avram Grant is believed to be top of Tottenham's shortlist of candidates to replace director of football Damien Comolli should the Frenchman leave White Hart Lane." Comolli did leave the club, but his job was abolished and Grant is still out of work.

Meanwhile, what of José Mourinho and Michael Vaughan, who were introduced in August and October respectively as the *Telegraph*'s new star columnists? According to Skippy, "José was one of the most high-profile managers of the Premier League and he will make a brilliant contribution to our coverage of British football", while Vaughan would be "a real asset to our cricket coverage. His experience of captaining the England cricket team and being one of the best batsmen in the world puts him in a remarkably strong position to comment on cricket."

Mourinho's "brilliant contribution" in the four months he has been with the *Telegraph* is a mere two columns, while Vaughan has so far done a Q&A... on golf. So, definitely worth all that money the *Telegraph* forked out for their services – and which hacks are now paying for with their jobs.

PS. The *Telegraph* has just got rid of popular columnists Craig Brown and A.N. Wilson. Brilliant management! What about sacking Matt next?

BIKE-RIDING, philosophy-loving *Daily Express* editor Peter "Mentally" Hill is in despair as his paper introduces a new computer layout system.

The attraction of this brave new world for proprietor Richard "Dirty" Desmond is that he can save pots of cash by dispensing with 86 subeditors, forcing hacks and commissioning editors to lay out the pages themselves. But the technology is riddled with glitches, making it a nightmare to produce even dummy pages. The chaos is not helped by the fact that besides firing the subs, Desmond has also got rid of most of the IT experts who could support his befuddled and bewildered hacks.

Still, at least help is at hand for the many Express Newspapers staff who are being axed before Christmas. "If you need a solicitor for any legal problem then the *Daily Star* Solicitors can help you," reads a mysterious ad in the selfsame newspaper. "If you have had an accident or recently lost your job unfairly, our solicitors can help. In some cases on a no-win-no-fee basis."

The ad offering help with redundancy and discrimination sits comfortably above a *Daily Star* "babes to your mobile" ad and next to one offering a FREE ADULT VIDEO. What attire the *Daily Star*'s "briefs" turn up in is not stated.

Meanwhile Desmond's right-hand man, Martin Ellice, is currently off work with what is reported to be blocked arteries.

Ellice, known as the Rottweiler, is famed for his hard-nosed approach to business at his boss's Northern and Shell empire. Hence sympathetic members of his staff have been heard asking how a man with no heart could possibly fall prey to such a condition.

"IT'S so easy to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say – and then don't say it," mused former *Daily Mirror* deputy editor Des Kelly in his *Daily Mail* sports column, decrying "newspaper loudmouths" who had called for Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger to be sacked.

"This week, a manager who has endured more than his share of idiocy from fair-weather, nouveau fans who only discovered football when the Premier League came into existence, delivered the perfect riposte to all the nonsense. Arsène Wenger silenced every halfwit, moron and boor who had called for his sacking."

Harsh words – but could he have anyone in particular in mind? Two days previously, in his column for sister paper the *Mail on Sunday*, Kelly's former boss (and bitterest enemy) Piers "Moron and boor" Morgan had issued a grovelling apology and declared himself "ashamed by my behaviour, appalled by my lack of judgment, and guilty, so terribly, horrifically guilty" in the wake of reader outrage after calling for Wenger to be sacked.

ME, ME, ME... ME TWO!

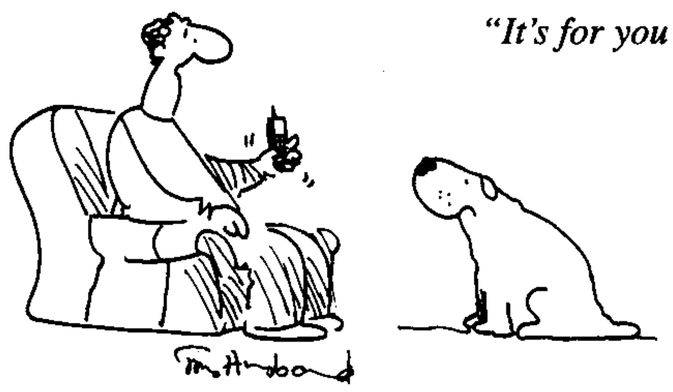
"I have been divorced for over two years, though I separated from my husband, Rod Liddle, 4½ years ago... Gordon Ramsay's alleged affair with a woman with the morals of an Amsterdam alley cat has brought my own situation into sharp relief."

– *Rachel Royce,* Daily Mail, *29 November*

"You've got to dump him Tana (and I should know, because I was married to a rat just like him)."

– *Liz Jones,* Daily Mail, *27 November*

"It's for you"



"BOARDROOM bonanza," howled the *Guardian* last Friday, frowning on the appointment of Sir Nigel Rudd as chairman of technology firm Invensys.

"More than 2,000 bank workers were earmarked for redundancy yesterday, but City veteran Sir Nigel Rudd was getting himself another job… That is likely to take his pay from his various boardroom jobs to almost £1m."

This Spartish attitude to fat-cattery does not extend to the *Grauniad*'s own boardroom, however. Carolyn McCall, chief executive of Guardian Media Group, enjoyed a modest £957,000 pay package last year. But she picked up a further £67,000 from a non-executive directorship of Tesco (until its libel suit against the *Grauniad* obliged her to resign), taking her over the £1m mark and easily eclipsing Sir Nigel. A boardroom bonanza indeed!

READERS of the *Guardian* will know what a dim view its pundits take of firms which get rid of staff and outsource their jobs.

"Agency workers are brought in to undercut existing wages," Polly Toynbee thunders.

"Across the country," her colleague Seumas Milne echoes, "workers are increasingly being signed up by employment agencies to take the place of directly employed staff, on worse pay and conditions – from basic wages and overtime to sickness benefits, holidays, maternity rights and pensions." It is, according to Milne, "shocking".

He and Polly must prepare themselves for another shock. When *Grauniad* hacks move into their new HQ at King's Cross next week, staff who work on the switchboard, in the postroom or on front-office security will not be joining them. Their jobs are all being, er, outsourced to cheaper agency workers.

THE GIFT OF LOVE?

ON 5 December the front page of the *Guardian* plugged a free offer of gift wrap designed by actress Tilda Swinton.

As many readers pointed out, however, when viewed upside-down the accompanying picture suggested that the design did not make perfect wrapping paper for all ages. Just be careful where the Sellotape goes...

A BIG interview with Boris Johnson in last Saturday's *Times* had a sidebar summarising his career, which apparently began in 1987 when the *Daily Telegraph* hired him as a leader writer.

Not quite: Boris's first job, from which he was sacked after a few months for making up a quote, was as a reporter on the *Times*. More than two decades later, the paper still finds this too embarrassing to mention.

AS the returns from the Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross affair diminished yet further, the *Daily Mail* still managed to claim last Thursday that "the BBC was plunged into another crisis last night after Chris Moyles appeared to suggest Poles make good prostitutes."

Outrageous! But from where could the loudmouth DJ have got such an impression? Er, quite possibly the *Daily Mail*'s own "re-imagining of how the charming parlour game Happy Families would look today" back in July last year, which featured the uproariously funny Eastern European character "Miss Katya, the blonde escort girl".

HACKWATCH

Shannonballs

1. SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

"For Shannon's mother, Karen Matthews, and her partner, Craig Meehan, the crass process whereby those suffering most are placed at the centre of the story, in the absence of real developments, was well under way... Karen was being subjected to a public grilling about many aspects of her personal life, and judged. This could not have been helpful. Meanwhile, the media has got its story, the public appetite for information has been whetted, and the door is open for Shannon's family and friends to be exploited further… Privacy is what she needs now, and protection. The media has no place at all in providing that."

– *Deborah Orr,* Independent, *15 March*

"Actually, it is pretty easy to label Karen Matthews. She is a classic sociopath, or, if you want to use the current diagnostic term, she has 'antisocial personality disorder'… What's really grotesque is that neither the stream of men nor any other interested party appears to have viewed Matthews's indiscriminate breeding as a red flag. Before she was arrested, Matthews's 'lifestyle choice' was even defended."

– *Deborah Orr,* Independent, *6 December*

– ❋ –

"Police insiders have also poured scorn on a theory that Shannon's disappearance was a hoax staged by one or more members of her family in the hope of gaining the reward money offered for her safe return. 'Don't be in any doubt,' a police source told the *Times*."

– Times, *17 March*

"Karen Matthews was living without work, or the prospect of work, on £400 of benefits every week. How surprising is it that she began to think that money could be gained without doing anything in return? Without anything constructive to do with her life, is it really so bewildering that her thoughts, and those of Donovan, turned to crime?"

– Times, *5 December*

– ❋ –

"I was brought up in an area just like the one where Shannon lives. I've never been to the Dewsbury Moor estate but I know about the people who live there… Our reaction to her disappearance has been tepid. It's as if we're saying that disadvantaged Brits don't feel, don't hurt, don't 'do' emotion in the same way the middle classes do. Which is tosh… Karen Matthews just isn't capable of mounting sophisticated media campaigns. She doesn't have the wherewithal or the connections of the McCanns. But she IS doing her damnedest to save her little girl – and we have to help her. Because she's hurting every bit as much as the McCanns are. Her agony, her angst, her guilt, eat into her soul just like they eat into Kate and Gerry's."

– *Carole Malone,* News Of The World, *9 March*

"Karen Matthews, Craig Meehan and his uncle Michael Donovan belonged to that sub-human class that now exists in the murkiest, darkest corners of this country. A whole legion of people who contribute nothing to society yet believe it owes them a living — good-for-nothing scroungers who have no morals, no compassion, no sense of responsibility and who are incapable of feeling love or guilt. That is Karen Matthews's scummy world."

– *Carole Malone, News of the World, 7 December*

– ❋ –

2. HOW JOURNALISM WORKS

"ONCE again social services have serious questions to answer," thundered the *Sun* after Karen Matthews' conviction for arranging the kidnapping her own daughter.

"Like Baby P, Shannon Matthews seems to have been let down badly by the very people who should have protected her… The *Sun* reveals how social workers failed to act on warnings from Shannon's teachers and Matthews' sister Julie… Shannon caused alarm by arriving at her school ragged and hungry.

"Her 'home' was a hell-hole ruled by a depraved mother and her pervert partner… The children endured misery and neglect in a pigsty where Matthews' partner Craig Meehan wallowed in child porn. All this has frightening echoes of the appalling Baby P case: council complacency and incompetence leading to disaster."

But who else failed to spot those hell-hole, pigsty conditions, awash with child porn? Surely not the team of ace reporters sent by the newspaper which boasted of having the closest coverage of the case, the *Sun*? Yorkshire reporter Alastair Taylor and several colleagues spent much of February and March camped in the family's front room on the *Sun*'s behalf. They interviewed a tearful Karen about how "she cannot face going into the bedroom the tot shares with her sister Courtney" and had "braved Mothers' Day without her little princess", all the while insisting that the family was "standing united to find our Shannon" in the face of "horrifying" rumours about their involvement.

Back in London, editor Rebekah Wade approved ever-larger rewards and columnist Lorraine Kelly cooed over how Matthews's "mother's instinct was proved right".

Describing the paper's coverage of the story, an unapologetic *Sun* managing editor Graham Dudman last week boasted: "We were all over it… We took this story on its face value." Hopefully, however, *Sun* readers won't have taken the paper's other revelations at face value. As the rag also reported: "Madeleine McCann's heart-broken parents pledged £25,000 to help find missing Shannon after being pestered to on behalf of Shannon's grasping mum Karen… One man even hammered on their front door demanding they chip in."

A police investigation earlier this year, following complaints by McCann spokesman Clarence Mitchell, revealed that the only man to visit the McCanns' home inquiring about their intentions towards the Matthews family was one Barry Keevins, a freelance hack who had been told to do so by… the *Sun*. His thoughtful mission resulted in the paper's exclusive of 25 February: "Kate and Gerry: We Pray for Shannon."

■ READERS of the *Sunday Express* meanwhile are still waiting for a follow-up to the sensational scoop which the paper ran on 13 April. "The mother of Shannon Mathews is thought to be pregnant with her eighth child." Eight months on, isn't it about due?

HEAT
HEAT
HEAT

HP SHAUSHE

MPs be warned: the festive season can make even the most upright legislators lose their footing.

Heed the cautionary tale of former *Observer* hack Paul Farrelly, who is now the Labour MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme and a member of the all-party parliamentary rugby union group, in which capacity he recently attended a private dinner for Lawrence Dallaglio at a central London hotel.

Farrelly became increasingly tired and emotional as the evening wore on, and by 1.30am he was a blathering wreck. It was time to leave. We turn now to the official "incident report" filed that night by the hotel doorman:

"I was on duty outside the front door keeping an eye on a group of drunken guests who had just left the building. After a short while all but one had left in taxis. The one remaining male, who I now know to be Paul Farrelly MP, turned towards the front door. He started to walk towards me but stumbled and in doing so his body seemed to move faster than his legs could keep up, causing him to crash to the floor and hit the right side of his forehead on the pavement. This knocked him unconscious.

"I immediately went to his assistance. At this time he was lying on his back and was making a strange snoring noise. I could also see clearly that he had a very large lump forming on his head and that there was no evidence of bleeding. I moved the casualty into the recovery position and in doing so opened up his airway, thus stopping the snoring noise and allowing normal breathing. I called for an ambulance on the security mobile. Whilst making the call he began to regain consciousness and wanted to stand up. I persuaded him to take a seat on the front step and wait for the ambulance."

SLOW TRAIN COMING

HUNDREDS of millions of pounds are to be poured into the government's Train to Gain programme, chancellor Alistair Darling announced in the pre-budget report – even though the scheme seems incapable of spending the money it already has.

The £350m spending rise for Train to Gain is part of a £1.3bn package to tackle unemployment and will expand the scheme to "provide support in pre-redundancy situations". But Train to Gain, which offers free skills training through the workplace, underspent by more than £200m in 2007-2008 – out of a £520m budget – despite the government spending £8m on a marketing campaign plugging the free training courses to employers. It also underspent by £100m the year before, its first year of operation.

Despite finding that the training was good for those who did take part, Ofsted inspectors reported last month that the Train to Gain programme had "not resulted in an increased employer demand for training" and that those employers who do use it often only "see the programme as a way of badging employees to meet legislative or health and safety requirements, rather than furthering skills they already have".

To the fury of the adult vocational training sector, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills eventually used last year's spare Train to Gain cash to fill a hole in its budget after overspending on university student grants.

CALLED TO ORDURE

The Green agenda

HYPOCRISY, yobbery, some appalling brown-nosing and even the odd dollop of principled outrage: all were on show in the Commons during arguments about the police raid on the Westminster office of Damian Green MP. The old place hasn't been this lively since the Maastricht debates during the Major years.

Yobbery first. Two Labour whips totally lost their rags when, during his response to the Queen's Speech, David Cameron went off on a riff about the Green affair. Government whips Chris Mole and Steve McCabe were sitting in the raised box just to the right of the double doors. Mole leaned so far forward he was in a crouch, holding the railings with one hand while pointing angrily with the other – and shouting, hard. He could have been a football fan full of snakebite.

McCabe (never the most intellectual of creatures) was behind him, also yelling and cackling. This from the party which has accused the Tories of making the Green arrest a low, party-political issue!

Until about three years ago, whips (who get paid a fat state salary for assisting the smooth progress of HMG's business) hardly ever sat on the backbenches, let alone uttered a word in public. Now they are practically bussed in to act as *agents provocateurs*.

A few Labour backbenchers proved more than pliant, even before the whips started hollering. The most glaring example came just after the Commons speaker Michael Martin had made his statement about the police raid. Several senior figures had risen from all sides to make points of order. Then we heard from Tom Levitt, Labour MP for Arslikhan (*High Peak, surely? – Ed*). Levitt droned on about "the right of ministers to expect 100 percent loyalty and discretion from their staff". He was going to say more but was rightly laughed down.

Similar pro-government pleading was heard from Barry Sheerman (Lab, Huddersfield), whose daughter just happens to be a special adviser to David Miliband (no leaking from her, then). Sheerman was horrified that the Commons should be discussing a police break-in. "My constituents would be very displeased if we were distracted from the main purpose of this House, which is making sure that the people of this country survive and thrive in this global economic turmoil," he burbled, to coughs of embarrassment from some more independent-minded Labour MPs behind him.

Throughout the discussions, ministers and their lackeys insisted it was perfectly in order for Inspector Knacker to have taken Green's computer – even though the cops will have had access to the parliamentary mainframe and may have been able to look at any Hon Member's inbox.

Such a relaxed approach from ministers was a contrast to the hysterics we had from them earlier this year when they wanted MPs exempted from freedom of information laws. Julian Lewis (Con, New Forest E) said that as a result of the Green raid, "the secrets of the confessional" were at risk. Harriet Harman replied that "we are not above the law". Except when it comes to freedom of information, perhaps.

'Gavel Basher'

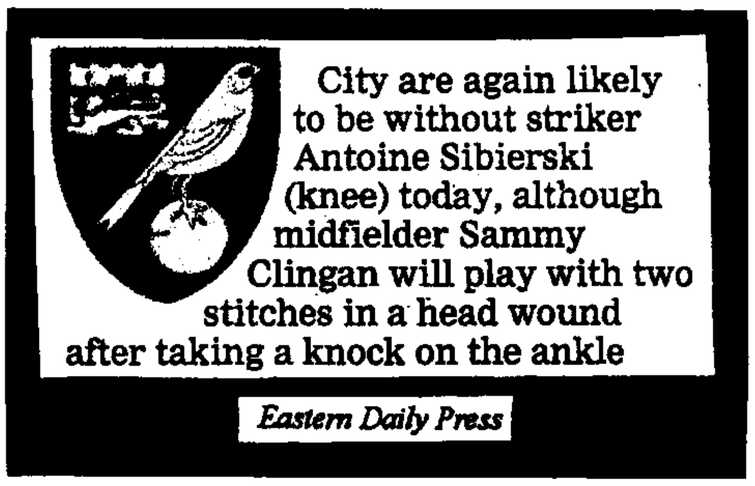
TENANTS EXTRA

SOCIAL housing tenants who look for work should be rewarded with an ownership stake in their homes, according to a progressive-sounding report from the Centre for Social Justice, the think-tank run by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith.

But IDS was more coy about the sticks to go with the carrot. Other proposals in the report did not get a mention in his interview with the *Today* programme.

The studiously "non-Conservative" think-tank wants to end the "stifling requirement" that a social tenancy should be secure for life. Instead, "the law must be changed so that councils and housing associations are free to let social homes on whatever terms they judge most appropriate to meet the particular needs of incoming tenants". Rules giving priority on new tenancies to homeless people would be changed so that "local authorities are free to use new social housing, and existing social housing as it becomes vacant, as they see fit". Meanwhile, new tenants would have to sign "commitment contracts" to look for work.

The ideas are not yet official Conservative policy. But they will be music to the ears of one former Tory icon. Dame Shirley Porter once planned to dispose of council homes in Westminster as she saw fit – by selling those in marginal wards to potential Tory voters.

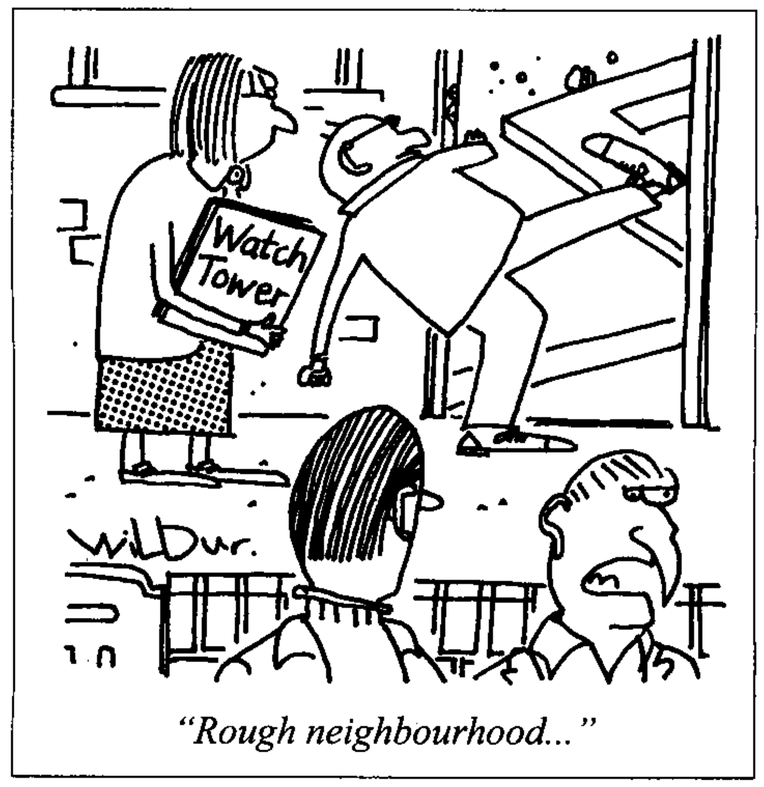

City are again likely to be without striker Antoine Sibierski (knee) today, although midfielder Sammy Clingan will play with two stitches in a head wound after taking a knock on the ankle
Eastern Daily Press

FIZZY STINKS

WHY is Pepsi involved in health secretary Alan Johnson's "Change4life" anti-obesity drive? Apparently, says the Department of Health, it's not because Pepsi employs the former health minister Alan Milburn. Nor is it because Pepsi employs Freud Communications, the PR firm hired to run the NHS's battle with our bulges.

Instead, the department's spokesman told the *Eye* that Pepsi, maker of sugary drinks and fatty Walkers crisps, is welcome. "This isn't an exclusive club," he said. "Anyone who promises to help families to be healthier can join. We are challenging every CEO of every company who can influence what we eat and how we exercise to come forward and tell us how they are going to help beat this national epidemic."

● The article about Snatch Land Rovers in the last *Eye* (Hutton Stew, HP Sauce) should have made it clear that Cougar, Viking, Jackal and Mamba were all vehicles used by the British Army, not the US. Sorry for any confusion.



"Rough neighbourhood..."

EARLY WARRING SYSTEM

FOREIGN secretary David Miliband was quick to call for "closer links between India and Pakistan" in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist murders. But at the same time as calling for peace between the hostile neighbours, Britain has been exporting everything they need for war.

The Foreign Office licensed £82.5m of British arms exports to India last year, including combat jets, helicopters, tanks, artillery and naval guns. Pakistan got just £18m worth of military kit, including air-to-air missile controls, military aircraft, combat helicopters, large calibre artillery and semi-automatic pistols.

In 2006 exports were more even. Pakistan got £62.3m worth of British weapons while India had to make do with £54.5m of army kit.

The latest Foreign Office licences released to the public show that this year Britain has sent India "attack alerting/warning equipment" and Pakistan "components for attack alerting/warning equipment", so thanks to Britain they will at least have an early warning of any impending war.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

85% Percentage of Afghanistan controlled by Taliban when war began in 2001

75% Percentage of Afghanistan with permanent Taliban presence after seven years of war

MEALE TICKET

LITIGIOUS Labour MP Alan Meale has dropped another libel action against a fan of Mansfield Town FC. The Mansfield MP abandoned his claim for £50,000 damages, days before it was due to go to the high court.

This latest claim was over questions in a letter to the local Labour party, including asking whether some allegations about the MP were true. Mr Meale claimed the question had libelled him.

The MP hasn't had much luck in legal battles with supporters of the "Stags". He got a court order forcing the fan club's online forum to reveal the identities of two fans who posted comments about him after he defended scandal-hit club CEO Keith Haslam. But the forum only had the names and email addresses of members. As reported in *Eye* 1185, season ticket holder Mark Wells was shocked to receive a letter threatening legal action and denied posting any of the offending material (there are several men called Mark Wells in Mansfield and more than one in the supporters' association). Mr Meale eventually abandoned that claim.

PA(YE) CONSULTING

PA CONSULTING, which earns around £100m a year from taxpayers by charging the government thousands of pounds a day for its management consultants, has been screwing taxpayers twice over – by dodging its PAYE bill with the help of tax avoidance consultants Ernst & Young.

Two weeks ago a tax tribunal heard how PA Consulting had bought what HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) called an "off-the-shelf scheme… to avoid PAYE and [national insurance] liabilities on the payment of annual discretionary cash bonuses to its employees."

The scam involved paying senior staff through the "Ellastone restricted share plan" in order to dodge tax of £7.9m, equating to the tax on bonuses of around £20m. And that's just the start of it. An earlier hearing on the case revealed that seven other similar cases involving PA companies and employees were pending, taking the total tax dodged to tens of millions of pounds. The tribunal has yet to rule on whether the scheme worked legally, though it has since been outlawed.

"There are non-overtly-Christian seasonal-song singers at the door"

Meanwhile, as the legal battle between HMRC and PA raged, the firm was earning millions providing advice on "lean" management techniques (where to place your stapler on your desk etc) to… HMRC!

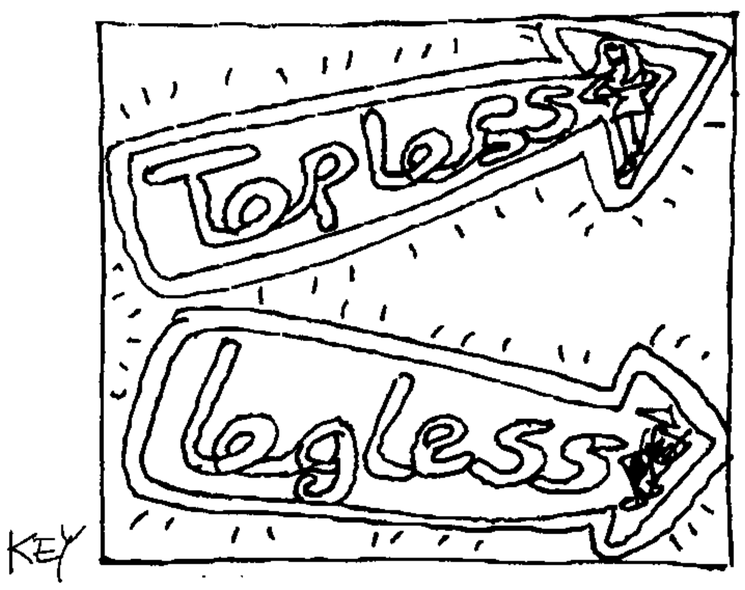
Among the great and good on PA Consulting's payroll is the chair of its defence advisory board Sir Mike Jackson, the recent former chief of the defence staff. A couple of months ago he complained that not enough taxpayers' cash is being spent on defence, leading to "outrageous" housing conditions for soldiers. The tax dodged by his new employer could easily refurbish a few thousand billets.

GEORGE OSBORNE'S promise to slash government consultancy costs looks less likely after the Conservatives announced that they received £50,000-worth of support from… yet another consultancy firm.

The latest Electoral Commission return says the Tories got the "technical support" from Boston Consulting Group in August. Boston Consulting works for governments around the world, but it has failed to make much impact with the UK public sector. Somehow the government has resisted the charms of a firm that publishes books such as *Acupuncture for Management*; *Five Future Strategies You Need to Know Right Now*; and *The Change Monster*.

Osborne told his party conference: "In the private sector when times are tough you take out the overheads. The consultants are sent packing," and "government should do the same". Boston Consulting must be hoping its support for the Tories will help it into the lucrative government market, rather than out of it, if David Cameron becomes PM. The firm hedged its bets recently by lending another member of staff "on secondment" to the Cabinet Office.

Boston Consulting supported the Tories with research for both shadow chancellor Osborne and Michael Gove, the shadow children's secretary. The company advises on schools reorganisation and education privatisation in Australia, America and Canada but has yet to break into the British education market. Developing policy for Gove could eventually lead to its big break.



LONDON CALLING

MORE trouble for London mayor Boris Johnson from top London Assembly Tory Brian Coleman, who was appointed by the mayor to chair the capital's fire authority, over plans to close the Fire Brigade Museum in Southwark.

The never-tactful Coleman outraged firefighters when he called for the museum's closure, saying: "When you've seen one brass helmet, you have seen them all." Closure of the impressive collection of documents and items (including seven fire engines) would have saved around £80,000 a year. But Boris the Menace has now stepped up to support the museum, announcing recently that it was "a valued asset to the community and an educational resource". A decision on its future is due in March.

JUST FANCY THAT!

MARTIN NAREY, head of children's charity Barnardo's, rightly attracted strong criticism for suggesting that had Baby P not been killed, his background suggested he may have grown up to become "feral, a parasite, helping to infest our streets".

He was accused by MPs and others of being "insensitive and provocative" for using the case of a child who had died after months of abuse to illustrate the need to tackle poverty and deprivation. What they didn't mention was that only eight days earlier, Narey had been spearheading a Barnardo's campaign to, er, stop branding children as "vermin", "animals" or as "feral".

"Our society faces a clear choice – we can either support troublesome children into becoming responsible citizens or we can reinforce their disadvantage by labelling them, expelling them from school or locking them up," Narey said. In labelling Baby P, however, he clearly reverted to his previous incarnation as head of the Prison Service.

SATANIC PANIC PT. 1

WHEN the trial begins in Italy next month of two people accused of the gruesome murder of Meredith Kercher, the 21-year-old Leeds University exchange student who was studying in Perugia, it will hear bizarre claims of Satanic rites and be prosecuted by a man with a history of believing in Satanic cult conspiracies.

Kercher died on 1 November 2007 after she was sexually assaulted and her throat was cut because, the prosecution alleges, she refused to take part in a drug-fuelled sex orgy. In October this year, the prosecution sensationally claimed that the murder was part of a Satanic ritual the night after Halloween. It was a "sexual and sacrificial rite", reported the Italian newspaper, *Il Tempo*.

Now the *Eye* has learnt that the public prosecutor in the case, Giuliano Mignini, has a history of believing in Satanic cult conspiracies and has been criticised for this "delirium" by an Italian judge in another notorious murder case, known as the Monster of Florence, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s when seven courting couples (14 people) were killed.

Mignini is even facing trial in Florence in a case related to that murder investigation which he conducted. He is officially under investigation, accused of obstruction of justice and abuse of office. In January an Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Serra*, reported the public prosecutor in Florence, Luca Turco, claimed Mignini "was conducting a crusade while in thrall to a sort of delirium" to defend his belief that the Monster of Florence case involved a Satanic sect – despite the firm conclusion of the FBI and Italian police that the murders were the work of a lone serial killer.

Despite the allegations against him, Mignini is still in charge of the Kercher murder case in which Amanda Knox, 21, a fellow exchange student from Seattle, who rented a cottage with Kercher, and Knox's former boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito, also a student, are accused of her murder. They both deny the charge.

(To be continued...)

ITV

Take That Come to Town (ITV1)

The British Comedy Awards (ITV1)

IT'S well-known that ITV is struggling for viewers and advertising, and the channel's flagship programmes last weekend revealed the cunning strategy to address this problem: the shows will become extended adverts, while editorial decisions will be taken almost entirely with the aim of attracting media attention.

For example, **Take That Come to Town,** though posing as an independent programme, could easily have been made by the band's record company as a DVD trail for their new album, although if it had been it might at least have been a tad journalistically tougher.

In a studio rigged up with trapezes and swings to look like a big top – the lads' CD is a concept album with a circus theme – the jowly and greying former pop munchkins gurned and sweated their way through their greatest hits and a sensibly small sprinkling of more recent compositions. During the first commercial break, there was a trailer for next week's Saturday-night special on the channel – a Girls Aloud concert – which suggests that ITV's current highest ambition is to become HMV.

Handing over peak-time airtime to bands with a record to plug isn't restricted to commercial television (BBC2 recently did the same for Coldplay) but, simply through being so long and so embarrassing, this Take That special was an especially shocking example of the genre.

Realising, after a lengthy opening medley of old hits, that the show needed some kind of editorial content to see off Ofcom, a top hat was brought on to stage, containing questions from a studio audience which seemed to consist entirely of screeching young women auditioning for the late-night drunk scene in the next *Bridget Jones*.

The penetrating questions began with: "Jason, now that all your band-mates have kids, does it make you broody?" When Jason conceded that it had, a cry of "I'll have your babies, Jason" came from the studio audience.

Grilled on which songs except the Take That back catalogue he secretly wished he had written, Gary Barlow admitted: "Do you know, I actually love Abba."

As the show was halted by screeching so loud and sustained that viewers must have wondered if rats had invaded the studio floor, it was only a wonder that Gary didn't hold up a DVD of *Mamma Mia!* with a supermarket reduction sticker on it. One Pac-man-like fan dared to raise the absence of Robbie Williams, but even this was turned to optimistic spin: "The four of us have seen a lot of Rob this year and he's become an important part of our lives again. Thank you for your question!"

A few more greatest hits were sung and then the band announced that their "greatest fan" was in the audience. This turned out to be Peter Kay in drag, as the Belfast wannabe songstress Geraldine, whom he introduced in a recent Channel 4 spoof of reality TV. While they were borrowing from Channel 4 shows, they should have gone further and taken a title as well: "Shameless".

Perhaps, though, the entire channel should be rebranded in that way because the word would also have served usefully for **The British Comedy Awards**. Having lost their original host, Wossy, to media "disgrace", they replaced him with Angus Deayton, which suggests either that the producer is a moral theologian of unusually provocative subtlety, or that the show was desperate for any kind of publicity at all.

Confirmation of the latter explanation was rapidly provided by the inevitable award for Russell Brand. Russ couldn't actually be shagged to turn up but, in his video acceptance speech from Hawaii, movingly dedicated his gong to Ross. Anyone who tuned in after being up the Amazon for a couple of months would have got the impression that Ross was courageously fighting some terrible disease or under house arrest for making a brave political speech, rather than having a long Christmas shopping break because of humiliating an old man during a conversation about where his celebrity mate's cock had been.

When Ricky Gervais, also unable to be present and sending thanks from a film set, also won an award, you remembered Peter Kay, Brand and Ross and reflected that these two weekend peak-time ITV shows depended almost entirely on talent under contract to other channels. Ross, of course, may be looking for a move and, on this shabby form, it would be little surprise if ITV snapped him up.

'Remote Controller'

DUMB BRITAIN

Are You Smarter Than A 10-Year-Old?, Sky One

Noel Edmonds: How many days will there be in the year 2010?

Contestant: Er… is it 60 or 52?

NE: What is the English translation of the French word "voiture"?

Contestant: A tree.

The Weakest Link, BBC1

Anne Robinson: In sporting folklore, the word "golf" is often erroneously said to be an acronym of the phrase "gentlemen only, ladies..." what?*

Contestant: Fornicate.

*Answer: Forbidden.

"On top of all the health and safety issues, your business plan involves giving all your products away?! I'm out too!"

AD NAUSEAM

JOHN LEWIS's Christmas ad campaign is about finding the right present for the right person. It shows an array of misfits juxtaposed with the gifts that might suit them (Afghan hound… hairdryer… boom tish!)

It's an age-old sell – something for everyone – and if it strikes you as lacklustre, you're not alone. John Lewis doesn't like the ads much either, so it's appointing a new agency. It's become the most exciting pitch in an otherwise roundly miserable adland at the moment, with BBH, Adam & Eve, McCann Erickson, Wieden & Kennedy and the sorry incumbent Lowe (which has just lost the Stella Artois account) in the running.

The perennial problem with pitches for agencies is knowing whether they are really in the running. Adland jobs on both client and agency sides change all the time, and former colleagues often end up working together again. For example, no one in the industry would be remotely surprised if start-up agency Adam & Eve won John Lewis's £20m account because Craig Inglis, who became John Lewis's head of brand communications in February, is managing the pitch. Until late last year Inglis was marketing director at Virgin Trains, whose advertising account had been with RKCR/Y&R for more than a decade. Then, in March, senior management at RKCR/Y&R went off to launch Adam & Eve.

Were Adam & Eve to win, Inglis would be able to hook up again with his old muckers. Wouldn't that be grand!

DDB'S new poster campaign for the *Financial Times* consists of a single, stirring image. It is a St Bernard in a blizzard, standing proudly atop a snowy peak. But instead of the usual barrel round its neck, it has a copy of the pink 'un. There is no tagline, but the message is unequivocal: when the financial climate is dire, the *FT* will save you.

Except, that is, if you're one of the unfortunates who works for the *FT*, in which case the St Bernard might as well be pissing up your leg. Last week, as the posters went up, an email arrived from chief executive John Ridding announcing voluntary redundancies and pay freezes, with the option of a three- or four-day week. The *FT*'s advertising account, by the way, is worth £5m.

***EYE* 1220 noted how the Cadbury's drumming gorilla campaign, widely touted as the very best UK advertising has to offer, had done not one jot to help the brand's market share. Another brand renowned for its clever ads is Honda, who bet the house on agency Wieden & Kennedy with a succession of outré ads that have won the agency countless awards.**

Honda itself has been rewarded with sales so shocking that it announced last week it would have to sell, or close, its Formula One team. Of course, not all this can be laid at the feet of the adverts, but when sales soar adland is quick to take the credit. Honda's slogan, lest anyone forget, is "The Power of Dreams"; recent ads have sung of dreaming the impossible dream and its F1 cars have "Earth Dreams" emblazoned on their tail fins. Now we know – dreams are all very well until reality bites.

JUST FANCY THAT!

"TAKE A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON US AND YOUR CAREER.

Join a Woolworths Group PLC company and enter a world of opportunities! If you are up for a challenge, there is none greater than Woolworths Group."

– Woolworths PLC recruitment website

MEDIA NEWS

THERE were dramatic scenes on Sky News as Indian special forces launched their assault on the terrorists holding out in Mumbai's Taj Mahal Hotel.

Sky correspondent Alex Crawford even delivered a piece to camera "within yards" (200, actually) of the hotel, while she lay on the ground, "taking cover" from fire. But sadly, when her cameraman widened the shot, viewers could see that at least 80 other journalists were with her, some crouching, others simply standing around having a fag or jabbering on mobile phones.

One cameraman, wearing full body armour, was filmed lifting his camera from its tripod to move position. Luckily there was an Indian fixer to hand, wearing no protection at all, to fold up the tripod "under fire" and carry it to the new and safer vantage point.

THE fall-out from the Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand scandal continues to rumble through the higher echelons of the BBC.

Compliance rules are being tightened on all shows regarded as "at risk", which must now be signed off by both an executive producer and a BBC commissioning executive prior to transmission, no matter how little time elapses between recording and transmission.

At a recent meeting deputy director-general Mark Byford threatened "serious repercussions" for anyone breaking these rules, which his boss Mark Thompson helpfully clarified for those present – "that means instant dismissal". Executives swiftly surmised that they will be damned if they do and damned if they don't, given that having your name attached to any "at risk" programme to which the *Daily Mail* subsequently decides to object is likely to end in instant dismissal, too.

Elaine Bedell, controller of entertainment commissioning, left to become director of entertainment and comedy at ITV just days later, complaining that she had "grown tired of having to constantly police shows rather than produce them".

Corporation staff are at least to receive guidance as to what is and isn't acceptable: following a lengthy discussion of whether "fucking" is more offensive used as a verb – the Ross usage – or an adjective, it was agreed to set up a "group examining where the appropriate boundaries of taste and generally accepted standards should lie across all BBC output". It is to headed by Roly Keating and Alan Yentob, who will henceforth be known across the BBC as the Fuck Tsars.

BBC director-general Mark Thompson's hare-brained scheme to move whole departments and huge numbers of staff from London to Salford looks even crazier now that we are in the throes of recession and house prices have collapsed.

Desperate BBC executives have taken to persuading the official party organ *Pravda*, aka *Ariel*, to promote the Salford move, running a cover story extolling the virtues of the new "media city", complete with a gleaming photograph of three eager young BBC production staff. On an inside page is more gush about the joys of living in Manchester's former docks, with prices of typical one and two-bedroom apartments – but no mention of how BBC staff are supposed to sell their London homes before heading north.

However, there is a clue elsewhere in *Ariel*'s pages that Salford may not be all it's cracked up to be. A classified advertisement from Quay Property Investments says: "Media City Salford Quays Off-Plan Discounted Property for Sale. Weather [*sic*] you are looking to relocate or the potential for a fantastic investment in this unique Media City."

It certainly is unique! Thompson's motivation for the Salford move was always political – he dreamed up the plan to keep Labour MPs in the North West sweet in return for government support for the licence fee. But hapless BBC hacks dread the prospect so much that many would rather take redundancy.

THE BBC has an exciting new source of expertise for its stories about the Middle East – especially those sovereign wealth funds that are busy gobbling up ailing British companies.

Anil Bhoyrul, billed as "the Dubai-based editorial director of ITP Publications", has appeared recently on everything from BBC News online to Radio 4's *The World Tonight*. And why not? If Piers "Morgan" Moron can reinvent himself as a commentator on media ethics, there's no reason his former dodgy share tipster can't become the editorial director of a reputable business in the United Arab Emirates.

ITP publishes more than 60 business magazines, but more recently has been in the news following the arrest of one of its senior sales executives for having sex on a Dubai beach. Fortunately its distinguished chairman, Andrew Neill, is just the man to stamp out such immoral and unIslamic antics.

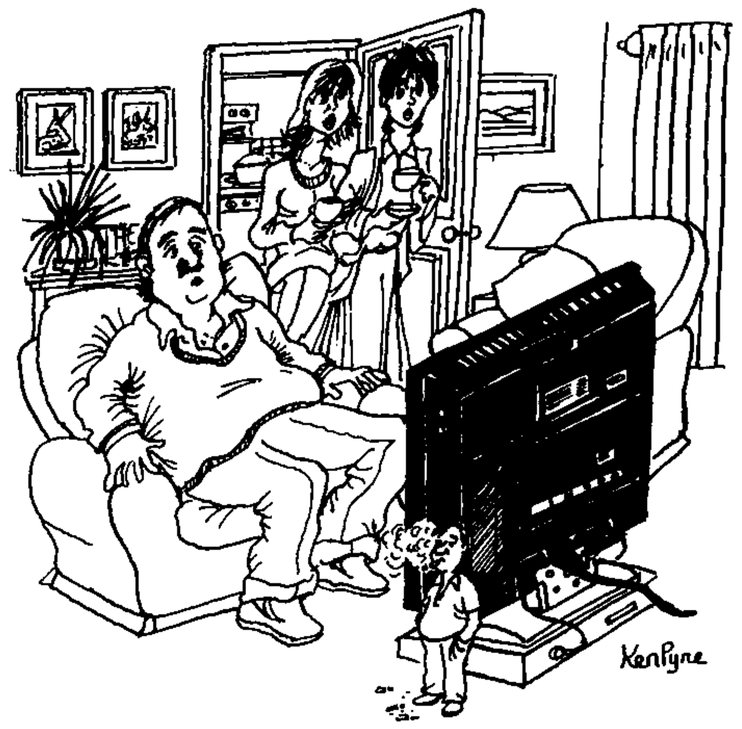
THE days of trebles all round are truly over – at least for the wretched Jake Smith of ITV, who has been working on the jungle spin-off show *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here Now* and sent this desperate message to several PR firms last week:

"Friday the 5th is the last show in which the jungle king or queen will be announced. Over in London in the live studio they will be having some great celebrity guests come join the party atmosphere. Jake is looking for around six bottles of champagne/cava/sparklingwhite wine to give to the celebrity guests and presenter Mark Durden-Smith to party with. Please…"

GORGEOUS pouting Louisa Fletcher bills herself as a "property goddess", the Nigella of home-buying. Many thousands of *News of the Screws* readers rely on her weekly column for trustworthy advice on what to purchase and how to finance it; she also pops up regularly on GMTV.

The same Louisa Fletcher can now be found lending her charming imprimatur to the website of IAP Global, a buy-to-let property company which has just arisen from the ashes of Instant Access Property and Inside Track – both owned by the notorious buy-to-let evangelist Jim Moore through a Panama-based foundation. Instant Access went bust to the tune of £7m earlier this year, leaving lawyers Schilling some £60,000 down and Mischcon de Reya with a £25,000 loss, while hundreds of hapless investors were stuck with unfinished flats and properties which failed to live up to Moore's claims they could turn buyers into millionaires.

None of this seems to trouble Louisa, who has agreed to speak at Moore's seminars, answer his customers' questions about property and write a regular newsletter for his website. Although she was "a bit sceptical" when she first met him, he quickly won her round: "I asked him some pretty awkward questions, but he always answered me truthfully and in detail."



"He does the sign language for the deaf"

PAST series of ITV's *X Factor* have seen viewers exhorted to enter a premium-rate competition to "Win Simon Cowell's Lifestyle" – but judging by recent events at his record company Sony BMG, that may not be an enviable prize for too much longer.

Staff there were recently told they were to undergo a "culture change" following disappointing sales from expected big hitters Il Divo and Dido and the drastic failure of a single release by *Britain's Got Talent* winner and Cowell protégé George Sampson in the run-up to Christmas.

All company phones and BlackBerries were to be handed back immediately, with staff instead making business calls from their personal phones and charging the company back from their itemised bills at the end of each month. A complete hold on expenses has been instigated, with no more vague claims for "fruit and flowers", the term which has traditionally covered all manner of narcotic refreshment.

No overseas business travel is to take place until the new year, when it will be strictly economy only. And staff will only be allowed to take taxis if they are accompanying a recording artist and if that artist has agreed in advance that the journey will be recoupable from their royalties. As many as 60 redundancies from the London office are also mooted.

All hopes, meanwhile, are being pinned on the all-but-inevitable Christmas No 1, the single release by the *X Factor* winner. It was announced last week that this would be a cover of the Leonard Cohen song *Hallelujah*, to which Sony just happens to own the publishing rights. It has been famously covered by artists as diverse as Jeff Buckley, KD Lang, Rufus Wainwright and… Il Divo, who performed it on their latest, underperforming Cowell-overseen album *The Promise*.

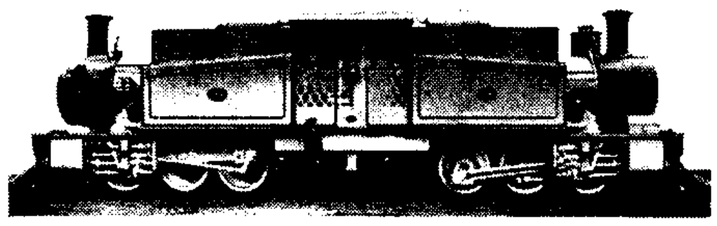
The drug contains melanin, a natural substance in the body which gives the skin its colour and protects, to a small degree, against the Sun. *Metro*

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

VICTORIA BECKHAM LAUNCHES HER DRESS RANGE
VICTORIA, HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO DO THIS?
WELL, I'VE ALWAYS HAD THIS INSTINCTIVE DESIRE TO.....
....LAUNCH A NEW CAREER WHEN I HAVEN'T BEEN IN THE PAPERS FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS!!!
CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP CLAP

SIGNAL FAILURES



Contract killing

AFTER years of accidents, close shaves and inefficiency, rail maintenance contracts were abolished in October 2003 by Network Rail, which expected to save £300m a year by taking maintenance in house. Bizarrely, it left track renewals in the hands of contractors such as Jarvis, although it had just launched an investigation into Jarvis' west-coast mainline work (*Eye* 1092).

Five years later, NR's interim results on 25 November revealed the crucial drive to improve NR's efficiency was on target for operational costs. Savings in maintenance were 33 percent against a targeted 34 percent. But NR moaned: "Renewals efficiencies remain disappointing, forecast to be 23 percent against a target of 30 percent, primarily as a result of track renewals where delivering savings remains particularly challenging, with predicted efficiencies only 14 percent."

PS: Two days after NR revealed that track renewals were too costly, Jarvis chairman Steven Norris was delighted with interim results showing Jarvis had rocketed to a £4.3m profit from a £3.3m loss – thanks largely to doubling its income from NR.

PPS: Norris was a transport minister when the Tories created track-renewals contracts. How satisfying for him that such contracts still achieve their objective of shovelling public money into private pockets.

TRANSPORT secretary Geoff Hoon has announced £1bn of transport spending, including new train carriages, "brought forward to help stimulate the economy". But whose economy will benefit from building those trains?

Britain now buys its trains from foreign companies. Some are assembled here; but most are imported complete. The country that invented railways and produced Stephenson's Rocket, Mallard and the Intercity 125 has lost its train manufacturers and their huge export market. They couldn't survive Whitehall's dogged aversion to steady renewal of trains and the 1990s rail-privatisation period when no new train was ordered for 1,064 days.

IN MAY 2006 FirstGroup launched ftr (shorthand for "future" public transport) bendy buses in York. Passengers complained about delays and faulty ticket machines (*Eye* 1159), but transport secretary Douglas Alexander declared: "I was impressed."

FirstGroup boss Moir Lockhead had boasted in 2005: "ftr is the perfect solution for local authorities in the battle against traffic congestion." So how's the battle going in York (where WorstGroup runs most buses)? Er, the city council reveals a 1.9 percent *drop* in bus passengers from 2006-7 to 2007-8.

After Lockhead's hype, the council expected "the perfect solution" to help it meet its target of 80 percent of passengers satisfied with bus journeys by 2009-10, from 71 percent in 2003-4. Alas, only 68 percent were satisfied in 2007-8.

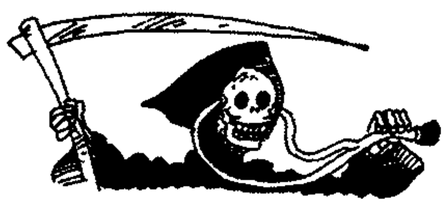
Alistair Darling (as transport secretary) officially launched the ftr concept in March 2005 and didn't wait to see how perfect ftr was in practice before cancelling Leeds' delayed Supertram project in November 2005 in favour of "rapid bus" technology.

Darling discussed ftr with Lockhead in October 2005 but "no notes were produced" of their meeting, according to the Department for Transport (DafT). Junior ministers discussed ftr in meetings with FirstGroup in January and August 2005. ftr was also "brought up" with DafT officials at unminuted meetings.

Last week Leeds transport officials admitted their rapid bus replacement for Supertram was unlikely to start until 2015 – nine years after trams would have started had DafT not interfered.

'Dr B Ching'

MEDICINE BALLS



NICE babies

WHY is the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) thriving after 10 years, with annual funding predicted to reach £100m, when so many other "new" Labour quangos have bitten the dust?

The Modernisation Agency, the NHS University, the Commission for Public and Patient Involvement in Health and the Healthcare Commission have all had their chips. But NICE is bigger than ever, having just landed the contract to host a "one stop information portal" called NHS Evidence.

At its most basic level, NICE is a firewall between the "dying mother denied vital cancer drug" stories and government. No politician wants to be trapped in an anguished debate about an individual tragedy, so it's far easier to pass the buck to NICE. Harder to ascertain is whether NICE delivers value for money. It has now produced so much guidance that it's in danger of devoting all its resources to updating what it already has, rather than assess new treatments. And is there any evidence that its guidance is actually used on the frontline to improve care for patients?

M.D. has been to the last three NICE conferences and the highlight is always the competition for those who've put the evidence into action. This year's winner was an obstetric team from North Bristol NHS Trust who wanted to reduce brain damage to babies during birth. This is still a huge problem. The 7th Confidential Enquiry into Stillbirth and Disability in Infancy found much the same as the previous six: in 75 percent of cases there was evidence of poor care, most frequently a failure to interpret electronic fetal monitoring (EFM).

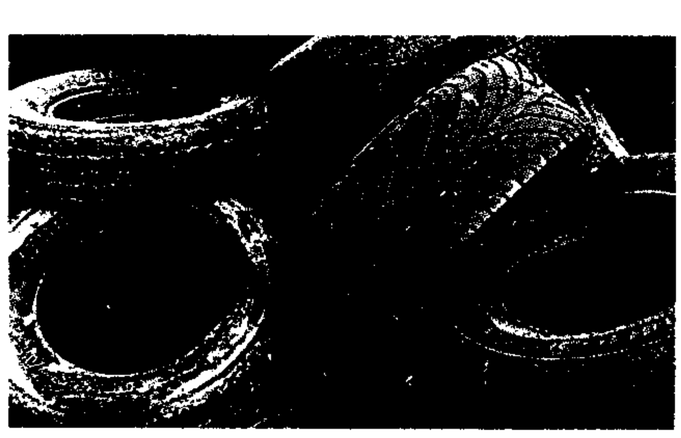
NICE concluded in 2001 that delays in recognising and acting on the signs of suspected fetal distress could lead to prolonged resuscitation at birth, brain damage due to a lack of oxygen and increased risk of cerebral palsy. This is not just a human tragedy. Claims arising from negligent obstetric care cost the NHS more than claims for all other specialties put together.

NICE recommended that all maternity staff should receive annual training in EFM, and that outcome measures of oxygen starvation, such as five-minute APGAR scores (which assess the baby's Activity, Pulse, Grimace, Appearance and Respiration) should be monitored. The North Bristol team managed to get everyone to turn up to training, from the most junior midwife to the most senior obstetrician, and devised a simple sticker for the notes to ensure all members of staff recorded the EFM in a standardised way, even if they were knackered and trying to look after more than one labouring woman at the same time.

The sticker makes it easy to spot when the EFM trace is normal, suspicious or pathological, and when to call for urgent senior support. As a result, problems are spotted earlier, low APGAR scores have halved and the number of babies showing signs of brain damage due to lack of oxygen has fallen by nearly two thirds. The annual training course costs less that £20 per member of staff, easily offset by the savings in litigation.

The NHS has a fine record of innovation and improvement, but it usually doesn't spread across the board. The NICE website has a "shared learning database", but to use it, NHS staff need time to focus on the evidence of what works, rather than running around trying to implement un-evidence based reform. If the Darzi review is true to its word, puts evidence at the heart of healthcare and backs it up with adequate training, it might actually improve care. And it could even save money.

M.D.



ECO-GNOMICS

Sales hitch

THE government, keen to promote its green agenda, is paying a private company to find speakers for a conference in February aimed at local authority "key decision-makers" in waste and recycling. Alas the chosen company, Public Service Events, owned by publishing firm PSCA International Ltd, seems to have a limited grasp of the key issues.

One item on the agenda is how to tackle the mountains of un-recycled tyres across Britain; and PSCA duly contacted a new company, PYReco, which has licensed the only patented pyrolysis technology capable of recycling tyres back to their original components, while generating extra energy at the same time.

The PSCA representative got through to the company's chairman, environmental entrepreneur Anthony Carter, and delivered a eulogy on PYReco and its potential synergies with the government's environmental policies.

Mr Carter listened patiently to the (inaccurate) analysis of the benefits of his own technology before smelling a rat: this was in fact nothing more than a sales pitch; the punch line being that if PYReco paid £10,000, it would get 45 minutes to address several hundred local authority officers.

An incredulous Mr Carter asked why he should pay such a huge sum to help the government meet its own recycling and CO_2 targets by advising the bodies that most needed the advice. Surely the value went the other way? At this point the sales rep offered a discount, before adding tersely: "If you don't want the slot I have several other tyre recyclers who are willing to take it, you just seemed to be the best option."

This was a clanger, since there is no other company in Britain capable of recycling tyres in a way that will address the issue properly. The "several others" simply shred them down to different sizes, leaving the basic problem unaltered.

In hiring PSCA the government is using taxpayers' money to sell PR puffs at its own event advising local authorities on how to implement government policy. It is quite happy to sell slots to firms that cannot possibly solve the problems being discussed, provided they are willing to pay £10,000 for the publicity opportunity. Nice work if you can get it!

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

DESAI OF RELIEF

COUNCIL taxpayers in Leicester are facing their own local credit crunch in the form of Labour councillor Iqbal Desai.

According to concerned party colleagues, Cllr Desai, who represents the Stoneygate ward, is in the habit of borrowing large sums of money from friends and acquaintances... and not paying them back. Desai's creditors – thought to number in the dozens – come mainly but not exclusively from Leicester's Gujarati community and are at something of a disadvantage because few have any sort of written agreement with the businessman, who is estimated to owe hundreds of thousands of pounds.

"It's not the Asian way," one disgruntled lender told the *Eye*. "Everything is supposed to be on trust." A credit check by the *Eye* reveals that two unnamed creditors have won county court judgments (CCJs) against the councillor in the past few days – one is owed £3,267 and another £2,080. One of the claimants with a CCJ in his favour is believed to be Ibrahim Hewitt, who, as chairman of a Palestinian relief charity, the former principal of a Muslim primary school and former personal assistant to singer Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens), is a respected figure in Leicester's Muslim community.

Hewitt told the *Eye*: "Mr Desai is bringing his position as a councillor into disrepute. He was elected to give service to the community and he is taking advantage of the respect that goes with that, but he doesn't deserve it. It is outrageous that the Labour party is doing nothing about it. I know that Ross Willmott [leader of the council] and Sir Peter Soulsby [MP for Leicester South] have known about this for months, yet they have apparently done nothing. I told my own MP, Patricia Hewitt [Leicester West, no relation to Ibrahim Hewitt] about it myself. I'm very angry."

It is not as if Cllr Desai, a wealthy man with a large house, a Mercedes and several commercial properties, is short of a bob or two. Apart from a string of similar, relatively small "personal" loans, Cllr Desai is also alleged to have obtained much larger sums, ranging from £20,000 to £150,000, from "investors" who were promised big returns from a business deal in Dubai which never materialised. Some of these investors are believed to have threatened to resort to more robust methods of recovering their money, involving baseball bats.

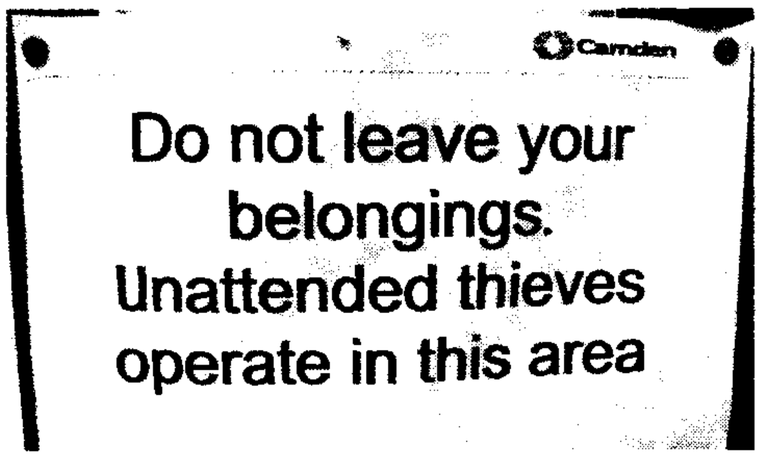
PRIDE BEFORE FoL

PREVIOUS *Eye*s have reported on Suffolk county council chief exec Andrea "Arndrea" Hill's love of psychobabble and "blue-sky thinking". *Eye* 1206 told how in her previous job at Bedfordshire she spent more than £200,000 sending staff on "neuro-linguistic programming" (NLP) courses, which, as one observer said, "sounds like something out of a brainwashing cult".

A Bedfordshire council officer who was sent on the £1,000-a-head course told the *Eye*: "It was the strangest thing I've ever been on. Highlights included looking for a hidden envelope in the playground of a village hall, making circus animals out of fuzzy felt and improvising a stage play on the theme of Bedfordshire county council being really, really good. The only useful things I came away with were the free pens and notepads, and a bag of Jellytots."

The courses were held at Eversholt village hall, a few yards from the HQ of the firm which ran the NLP courses, Fields of Learning (FoL), in the amusingly named Witts End. FoL, a small company which won the contract with Bedfordshire without having to go through any tiresome formal procurement process, is run by Australian Catherine Doherty, who has shared stages with Arndrea Hill at various local government events. FoL's website claims its "flair in working with groups creates energy and creative thinking to solve the issues that will make the difference in organisations". Hmm.

Soon after Arndrea got the £218,000 Suffolk job, the council signed up for 400 staff to go on "neuro-linguistic programming" courses, held in a village hall, at £1,000 a head (*Eye* 1223). Sound familiar? This time, however, an invitation to tender for the contract was placed on the UK government procurement portal, Supply2.gov.uk, and the council received more than 100 expressions of interest. But, by an amazing coincidence, the contract was awarded to none other than, er, Fields of Learning.



Chalk Farm Library. **Submitted by Marek Laskowski.**

● HOUNSLOW'S inglorious experiment in outsourcing leisure and cultural services to the "not-for-profit" shambles that was the CIP Group was terminated earlier this year after a decade of appalling service, along with the architect of the experiment, assistant chief executive Howard "Hairy" Simmons (*Eye* 1210).

CIP demanded £11m to go quietly, threatening to take all the library books it had bought during the past decade. Eventually it settled for £3m of taxpayers' dosh and left the books. The council has now chosen a new contractor, John Laing Integrated Services, which holds no truck with that "not-for-profit" rubbish. According to JL's website, it offers specialist support including "firearms management" and, until very recently, "petrol bomb making". Perhaps with the current energy crisis, alternative fuel sources need to be considered. All those extra library books may come in useful after all.

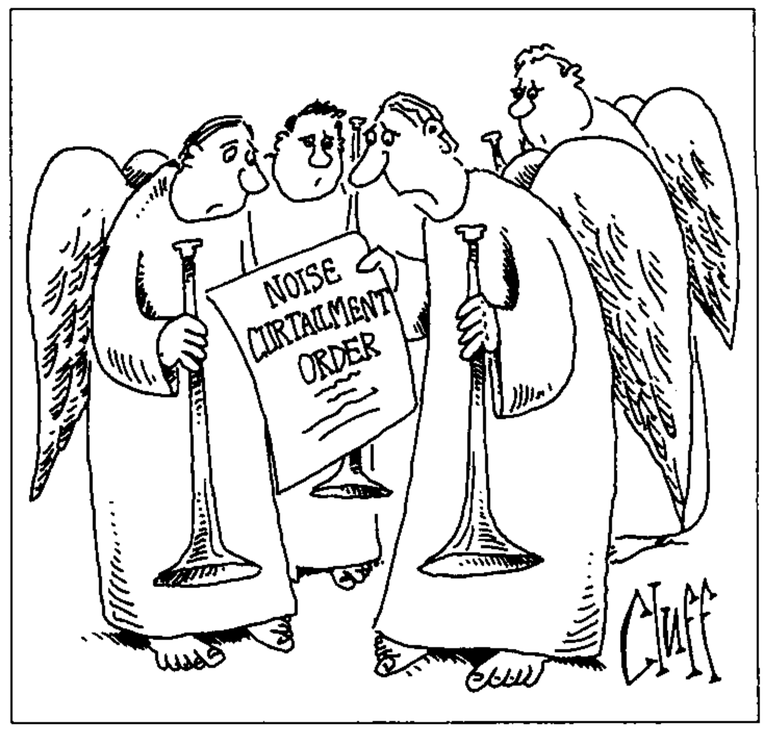
BLUE SKIES OVER

MUCH disappointment among the blue-sky thinking community as Haringey council's children's services director, Sharon Shoesmith, axed in the aftermath of the Baby P scandal, pulls out of an important speaking engagement at a conference at the New Connaught Rooms next month.

Ms Shoesmith was to have held forth on the subject of "Breaking Down Silos: Inspiring Ownership And Sharing Responsibility For Measuring Impacts And Outcomes Across Partnerships" at the day-long event. Hopefully the organisers, Haymarket Conferences, will not face too many demands for reimbursement of the £645 fee from delegates attending the "Advance Beyond Target Chasing and Strategically Measure Impacts and Outcomes" conference on 28 January, for there are many other treats in store.

They can learn from Mark Rogers, chief exec of Solihull metropolitan borough council, how to "integrate different means of measurement and aggregate data from different service areas to find out if children and young people actually experience material benefits from your service", or hear the views of Parvinder Chana of Telford and Wrekin council on "how to embed measurement into the fabric of your service and design a framework that supports monitoring and measurement at every stage to ensure you effectively evaluate the impact your service is having on children and young people's lives".

Shoesmith may be gone. But as long as her colleagues carry on breaking down silos, embedding measurements and aggregating data, there is surely hope for Britain's vulnerable children.



BACK ON THE MANOR

RESIDENTS of the Manor Park ward in the London borough of Newham are not entirely happy about the ambition of their Labour councillor, Ayub Korom Ali, to become an MP.

This seems churlish, because Cllr Ali is clearly intelligent and hard-working and certainly more than the equal of some of the deadbeats hanging about Westminster. Interviewed by the *Daily Star*, he strikes an Obama-ish note: "'Change,' he said. 'Change is crucial.' As the sun sank in the darkening sky these words, spoken in a quiet voice, seemed poignant and urgent."

Hang on a minute. Richard Desmond's boobtastic rag is not noted for taking much interest in the musings of East End councillors, however Obarmy, and its prose is a different shade of purple from this. A-ha! Cllr Ali's interview was with the Bangladesh *Daily Star*, not Desmond's organ. And he was seeking nomination as an Awami League candidate in the Bangladesh general election on 29 December – in the constituency of Sunamganj-5 (Chhatak-Duara), to be precise.

Hence his Newham constituents' puzzlement at how one can properly function as a councillor in Newham (with its allowance of £10,722) and at the same time campaign to be an MP in Bangladesh, especially, as the *Star* reported, the "Londoni politician is shifting his career, family life and home... to contest the forthcoming election". Sadly, as Enoch Powell remarked, all political lives end in failure. Cllr Ali returned to Britain last week, not having succeeded in being nominated for a seat in Bangladesh after all.

"I am devoting myself to my constituents in Newham," he tells the *Eye*, "having done my bit for democracy in Bangladesh." Hurrah!

● IN THE last *Eye* we reported that Chesterfield's Christmas lights – paid for with government money supposed to go towards job creation – were not going to be turned on in time. In fact the lights were turned on as scheduled. The confusion arose because the town's Christmas *tree* wasn't erected until the following day, for "elf 'n' safety" reasons. You can't have a Christmas tree and the crowd that have come to see it in the same square, can you? Grovelling, tinselly apologies all round!

NOOKS and CORNERS

HOXTON SQUARE in Shoreditch has been minding its own business ever since it was laid out as long ago as the 1680s. A few early houses still stand, but most of the buildings surrounding this quiet and unassuming urban space are varied and ordinary.

Fashionable in the late 17th century, Hoxton Square had become occupied by workshops and factories by the 19th century, while for much of the 20th it was in an area of great poverty. Now it has become fashionable again: it heaves and pullulates with designers and artists. No matter – except that one of the new residents has decided to drag Hoxton kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

Kenny Schachter, the owner of nos.33-35 Hoxton Square, hopes to replace the two indifferent mid-20th *century* buildings on the site with something "exciting". Almost inevitably, therefore, he has turned to the famous and fashionable *avant-garde* architect, Zaha Hadid, who has come up with something, er, exciting – indeed, it verges on the really iconic.

Zaha Hadid began her ascent by producing beguiling images of jagged, deconstructed, incomprehensible, unbuildable structures at the Architectural Association. She then leapt to fame by designing a fire station near Basel which, subsequently, the fireman refused to use so it had to be maintained as an iconic museum piece.

Later she came up with a jagged, wobbly design for a new national opera house in Cardiff (Eyes 857 & 864) which even distinguished professors of architecture found incomprehensible – but when the project was cancelled, her many acolytes insisted it was a scandal and an outrage. More recently, Hadid designed a new home for the Design Museum in Southwark which, after arguments over if and how it could be built, was also cancelled.

The "exciting" design for Hoxton Square is in the standard (and now rather dated?) Hadid style, with jagged shapes, arbitrary triangulated facets and a wilful contempt for the conventionally orthogonal – although the floors do appear to be horizontal. Inside, there is hardly a space which will have a right-angled corner – whether residential, commercial or for art gallery use.

The Hadid firm's proposal is for "replacing the existing buildings with a single exciting new mix-use part four, part five structure" and it helpfully explains that "The formal concept for the design is a prism that mediates between interior and exterior influences" and that "Just as the overall massing mediates the relationship of the building to its neighbours, the façade is also defined by its performance of mediating between the interior and exterior".

The architects dare to make the absurd claim that "The shape of the building as well as the openings are defined by the relationship of the building to its neighbours and the relationship of the interior rooms to exterior sources of views and light". Nonsense, of course – how come other less exciting architects have come up with rather different solutions to such conditions? Zaha Hadid Architects merely want to show off and be different. Never mind that a conventional façade with boring rectangular windows also mediates between inside and outside, and that a large, arbitrarily polygonal window may well not perform well, "The proposal will add a modern, innovative and architecturally exciting addition to Hoxton Square while respecting the existing urban massing and density of the conservation area".

All this is meaningless verbiage, when not actually mendacious; but there is no point countering that such a design is just posturing and silly as well as arrogant and ill-mannered. Zaha Hadid, like Milords Foster 'n' Rogers, is simply beyond criticism as far as the fashion-conscious who still subscribe to the "modernist agenda" are concerned, while architectural critics dare not comment adversely lest they seem reactionary.

The idea that the Hadid building will respect its neighbours because there are some horizontal lines on the façade is simply ludicrous. The adjoining buildings (one of which is a re-creation of an original 17th century house) are of brick, while the avant-garde masterpiece is to be faced in glittering stainless steel.

At least English Heritage has spoken out, noting that "The proposed scheme bears no relation to its context… an imposition on a finely grained London square which takes much of its character from the 'harmonious visual balance' where no one building acts as a dominant or overwhelming feature".

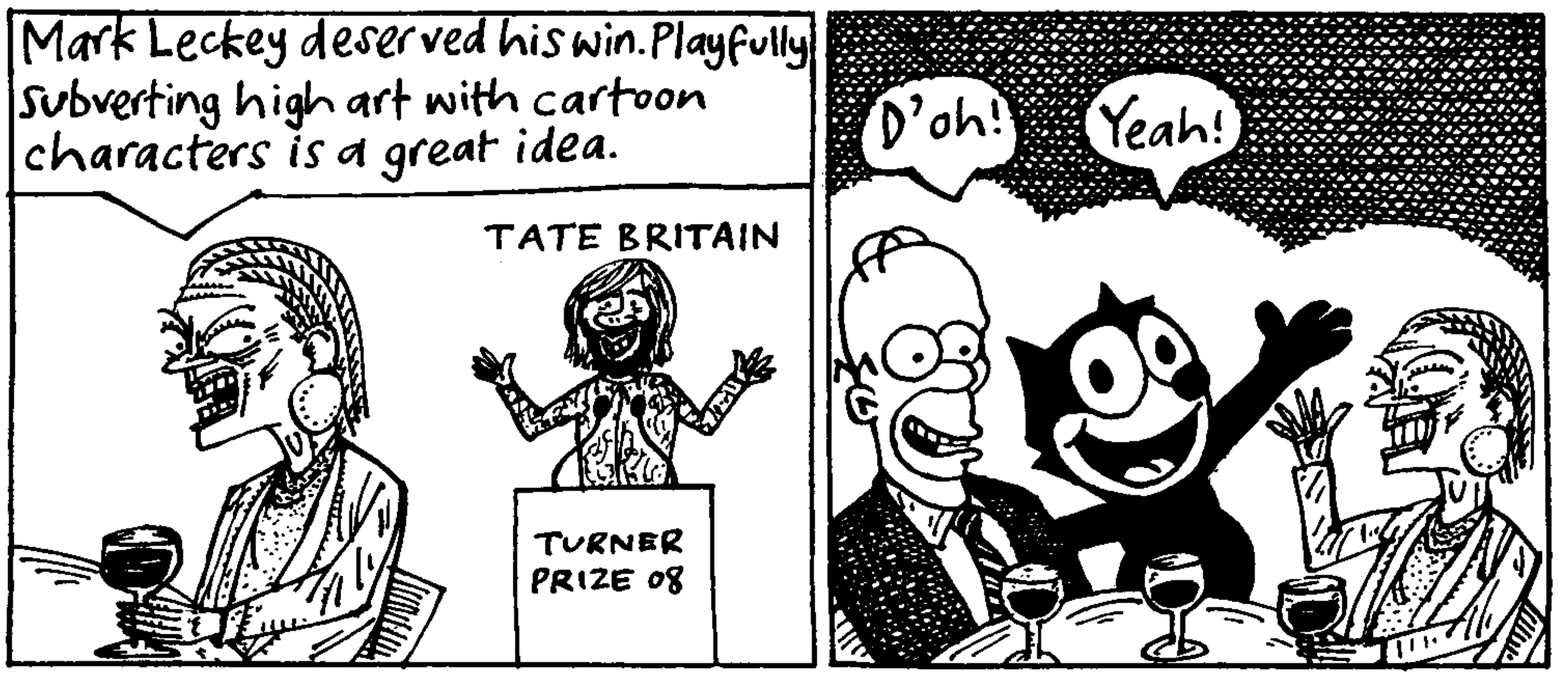
Hackney council, on the other hand, is thrilled to have a Hadid masterpiece in the borough, its supine conservation and design department fatuously commenting that, "The proposed building successfully delivers a distinctive new architectural element into Hoxton Square, which is dominated by vertical/horizontal elements. The angled shape and the reflective material will provide an eye catching *[sic]* directly from the key arrival point at Old Street outside the square and, therefore, help make Hoxton Square more visible."

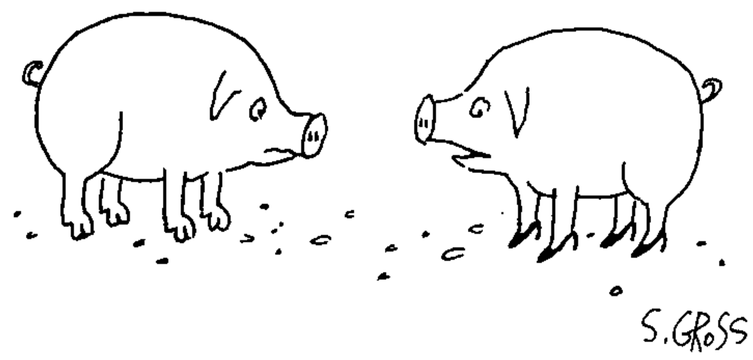
This would all be a huge joke if there weren't a serious risk that this gratuitous project might well be realised. And then London will have its first built Zaha Hadid building – which at least might at last puncture the over-inflated bubble of her reputation.

'Piloti'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH


Mark Leckey deserved his win. Playfully subverting high art with cartoon characters is a great idea.
TATE BRITAIN
TURNER PRIZE 08
D'oh!
Yeah!



"I'm hoping to get bunions so my feet won't look so edible"

IN 1895, Daniel David Palmer described how he met a deaf janitor in Davenport, Iowa. He "racked" a displaced vertebra into position and – a miracle! – the deaf man could hear.

Later he ran into a case of heart trouble. Another manipulation of the backbone, and he claimed to have cured that too.

Convinced he could heal sicknesses from measles to impotency, Palmer opened the first chiropractor teaching hospital. He told pupils that when a vertebra was out of place, it stopped the flow of "innate intelligence". The best way to get it going again was via "high-velocity thrusts" to the spine.

Palmer was loopy enough to think of himself as a saviour of humankind akin to Christ, Mohamed and Martin Luther. Not everyone agreed: he died after his son, who hated the high-velocity beatings, bought the first car in Davenport, Iowa, and ran his father down outside his hospital.

Today, however, if modern writers imply there is anything slightly flaky about Palmer's successors, a libel writ follows.

Earlier this year Simon Singh published *Trick or Treatment*, along with Edward Ernst, a professor at the University of Exeter, who specialises in assessing the claims of chiropractic therapy, homeopathy and acupuncture. Ernst is one of the world's leading academic authorities on alternative medicines, while Singh is one of Britain's most acclaimed science writers.

The authors warned readers to avoid "fundamentalist" chiropractors. They concluded that although practitioners of milder forms of the therapy may help patients with backache, conventional physiotherapy worked just as well and did not have the side effects of chiropractic treatments. As well as dizziness and headaches, there were 700 instances in the medical literature of patients suffering spinal compression fractures and other serious complications, and four reported deaths in Canada. As for Palmer's boasts, there was no evidence that it could cure illnesses which had nothing to do with the back.

The British Chiropractic Association (BCA) is suing for libel after Singh dismissed claims on its website that its members can help treat children suffering from colic, asthma, prolonged crying, ear infections and sleeping and feeding problems by gentle manipulation of the spine.

Unusually, the BCA is targeting Singh personally rather than his publisher or newspapers that have carried his articles. But if the BCA thought Singh would be intimidated by the risk of personal bankruptcy, it picked the wrong man to frighten. He is determined to fight. "There is an important issue of freedom of speech at stake," he says.

The case promises to be a clash between evidence-based medicine and its rivals. Singh will be able to quote from dozens of peer-reviewed papers to contradict the BCA's claims. For example, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* reviewed chiropractic spinal manipulation in 2006 and concluded that the evidence for its effectiveness in treating "infantile colic, asthma, and cervicogenic dizziness is uniformly negative. The risk of adverse side effects made spinal manipulation inappropriate as a treatment for those conditions."

'Ratbiter'

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

HAVING spent most of his time in Brussels espousing the virtues of self-regulation in the finance sector, Irish accountant and internal markets commissioner Charlie McCreevy has had a change of heart.

He recently asked those engaged in the catastrophic derivatives market to come up with "concrete proposals" for risk reduction by the end of the year. Now the horse has bolted, we should, apparently, whitewash the stable door – or at least paint it a colour of the bankers' choosing.

Europe's performance on financial regulation has been lamentable. Almost five years have passed since the European parliament asked the commission to assess the need for legislative intervention after a number of scandals, including Enron, Parmalat and Equitable Life, had hit the headlines.

The commissioners didn't exactly turn on a sixpence. Two years later, and acting on the advice of the Committee of European Securities Regulators (CESR), they decided to do nothing about a big source of the problem: the gung-ho Credit Rating Agencies (CRAs).

A year later the CESR assured the commission that "self-regulation by the CRAs functions reasonably well" and so the commission concluded that "no new legislative initiatives were needed" since "the right regulatory balance has been struck". Meanwhile, exultant American dealers were bundling up dodgy mortgages and flogging them to the gullible European retail banking sector like there was no tomorrow.

Finally, in July 2008, free-marketeer McCreevy admitted defeat. "I am convinced of the need to legislate in this area at EU level," he thundered, since "the crisis has shown that self-regulation has not worked."

Given that the commissioners exercise their duties on a collegiate basis, the question of collective responsibility arises. Will our own Lord Mandelson now accept some share of the blame in his role as European trade commissioner?

THE true colours of the EU flag were revealed to the horrified Czech President Vaclav Klaus during a conference of the presidents of the European parliament at Prague Castle last Friday.

Having thrust the EU flag under his nose, Eurofanatic MEPs Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the German Green, and Irish MEP Brian Cowley treated Mr Klaus to a torrent of verbal abuse, urged on by that arch crusher of dissent Hans-Gert Pöttering, president of the European parliament.

After listening to their rant that they had no wish to hear his views on the Lisbon treaty (which he would have to sign) or on the Irish (whom he had insulted for supporting a referendum on it), Mr Klaus muttered: "This is incredible… I have not yet experienced anything like this for the past 19 years… It is post-democracy, really, which rules the EU."

Mr Pöttering told Mr Klaus that it was "unacceptable" to compare them with the Soviet Union as they all cared for "freedom and reconciliation", at which point Mr Klaus pointed out that he had not mentioned the words "Soviet Union" – as if he needed to!

EU-phemisms

The Irish asked us to respect their vote. We said "No"

Letters

Private Eye

Murrer the merrier

Sir,

I wish to say a huge thank you to Private Eye for the unflagging support it has shown me during the past 19 months of the attempted prosecution against me by Thames Valley Police Professional Standards Department.

Your articles gave me hope and made me smile during a horrible time.

Thankfully the case has now been dropped thanks to the brilliance of my legal team – led by Gavin Millar QC – and the common sense shown by both the judge and the prosecuting counsel, Sir Allan Green QC.

I am positive that the Eye, with its mighty weight of opinion, played an instrumental role too.

*My co-defendant former police officer Mark Kearney (**not** Damian Green, MP!) joins me in thanking you and your readers whole-heartedly.*

It has been a long and bloody battle but it ended in a resounding victory for freedom of the press and human rights. We will always be grateful for the part you played in it.

Many thanks,
SALLY MURRER (Somewhat battered Milton Keynes journalist),

Via email.

Lookalike

Dancer

Cardinal

Sir,

I couldn't help noticing the incredible resemblance between Stanislaw Cardinal Dziwisz, Archbishop of Krakow, and recently resigned dancer John Sergeant. Are they by any chance related?

NICHOLAS PADDEN-DUNCAN,

Via email.

Green shouts

Sir,

'Ratbiter' is stretching the bounds of reason and logic to breaking point by implying that a couple of ex-Green Party members who are now in the BNP and one or two conspiracy theorists in the ranks means that the Green Party can trace a direct line of descent from the Nazis. In fact the whole piece was a farrago of snide insinuation and sixth-form debating society ad hominem arguments.

You might like to know that the Tony Gosling mentioned in the piece has also been a local representative for the National Union of Journalists – presumably, using Ratbiter's logic, this means that all journalists are also Nazis, including, er... 'Ratbiter'!

DR DAVID MURAKAMI WOOD (ex-Green Party National Policy Committee),

North Shields.

Scenes You Seldom See

"This question isn't about soaps, pop music or sport"

Sir,

I fear that Ratbiter may have caused Tony Gosling to be confused with someone else of the same name (Green Grow The Bigots, O – Eye 1224). The Tony Gosling who says of the blatantly faked Protocols of the Elders of Zion that "their authenticity has never been entirely proven or disproven" obviously applies very rigorous standards of proof indeed. He cannot be the same as the avowedly christian, ex-BBC, "investigative journalist" who plays such a prominent part in the 9/11 "truth" movement. In those circles any little wisp of circumstantial fluff is hailed as "evidence", if not "proof", of something or other. No aircraft were crashed into the twin towers, you understand, they were merely holograms.

If you doubt this, you are simply a dupe or mouthpiece of the CIA.

JIM PATON,

London E8.

Sir,

Concerning Ratcatcher's (sic) nazis and homophobes under the bed piece attacking the Green Party, it was I who helped persuade a majority of the party conference to support a call for a new investigation into the 9/11 attacks. None of the people he attacks were present.

Ratcatcher was clearly not present either.

Ratcatcher forgot to mention the only argument that anyone actually raised: that the facts don't fit the official 9/11 story and many in the US including the US Green Party are supporting the call to reinvestigate 9/11. Having done many months work researching and writing a book on the subject (when I could have earned much more money running my coffee business) I find it a little irritating that instead of checking the facts on the 9/11 attacks, which as you will recall "changed everything" (every pro-Washington media outlet) and made Washington's pre-planned Iraq war a reality, you prefer to run "political analysis" on the Green Party, fuelled presumably over a few invigorating jars at the local hostelry.

By the way, I am not a Nazi or a homophobe, just an old-fashioned left of centre guy who distrusts Washington and the CIA. So are most people in the 9/11 truth movement.

IAN HENSHALL,

Via email.

Flagging support

Sir,

How could we ever trust either the BNP or Nick Griffin – your picture of him in Eye 1224 shows him posing beside a Union flag which is flying upside down! No wonder they use the flag of St George: much easier to fly!

R. GILMORE-HEAD,

Melksham, Wilts.

A Gravesend error

Sir,

As a resident of Gravesend, I am delighted to see the future of our town debated in your pages (1223 and 1224).

Just to re-assure you – the overwhelming majority of Gravesend people are horrified by the proposed tower and the other enormous blocks of shops and flats planned for our conservation area.

I wonder what the word "regeneration" now means. Have any of your readers got examples of towns which have been successfully regenerated by the building of an iconic 33-storey block of flats?

A few community facilities would be nice, but the Council did not ask the developer to include any!

We currently have no cinema, no museum, no theatre (apart from the acoustically disastrous council-owned Woodville Halls), no concert hall, no bingo hall, no art gallery and no live music venues.

After the wonderful £150m regeneration we will still have none of the above.

But we will have lots of (empty?) flats and shops and an alienated population whose views are being cynically ignored by the Council and developer.

Yours faithfully,
ROGER GOW,

Gravesend, Kent.

Lookalike

Leeson

Paulson

Sir,

With the benefit of hindsight, and in light of the current financial meltdown, I can't help feeling that appointing the original rogue trader to the post of US Treasury Secretary may have been a small error.

COLIN O'NEIL,

Via email.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"It's going to take time for Tony Adams to inflict his style of play on Portsmouth."
STAN COLLYMORE, Channel 5
(M. Cooper)

"Certainly, some of the Rangers bench were unanimous..."
BILLY DODDS, BBC Scotland
(Richie Henderson)

"They [Liverpool] would have been much closer to where they are now if he [Anelka] had still been there."
MARK LAWRENSON, BBC1
(Michael Clayton)

"He's certainly a man who knows his own man..."
MARK LAWRENSON, BBC1
(gilesf)

"Botham talks about Brearley in glowing tongues."
JIMMY TARBUCK, Radio 5 Live
(M. Cooper)

Devon can wait

Sir,

Re HP Sauce (1224) Housing Special. Taunton is the county town of Somerset and some distance from South Devon. You should try to get away from the city more often.

Yours aye,
PETER WILD,

Rodney Stoke, Somerset.

●*True. Officials from the government office for the South West (based in Bristol) included Taunton on their whistlestop tour and the destinations were listed in alphabetical order. Apologies to Taunton.*

EASYVETS Neutering & vaccination clinics. Annual vaccination out of date? Have your gods & cats vaccinated up to date at half price till Xmas.

Evening Chronicle (Newcastle-upon-Tyne)

Pedantry Corner

... Re cartoon "oh dear, it's getting very acronymious"...

In popular culture today, the initialisms OMG, SOB and WTF are all, believe it or not, regularly pronounced as words by young people...

As both a student of popular culture, and a "young person" I feel more than qualified to make this statement.

DAVE BALCHIN.

... Regarding the acronymious comments published in the latest Pedantry Corner, since when has SOB been unpronounceable as a word? It's enough to make one WEPE (Write in Exasperation to Private Eye)

ANDY DAVEY.

... In your BNP list you mistakenly gave a false address for Inspector Knacker – 999 Acacia Ave. This is wrong, as any fule no he lives in 999 Letsby Avenue.

ROD DUGGAN.

We still haven't sorted out this business of the girl's name. The number of syllables isn't right. Surely, if her first name is Tara, then her surname must be Raboomdeeay.

CHRISTOPHER GALLOP.

Pseudo names

... I lay the blame for this epidemic of false names firmly at your door.

JACK HUGHES.

... It is a pity Sidney Harberbridge refers to this latest fad as an example of "schoolboy humour". When I was at school, it was the gels who produced the greatest witticisms, not the boys.

ANN TEAK (Miss).

... While echoing your correspondent Corrine A. Schonstriet's call for an end to made-up names on letters, we abhor her snobbish attitude towards soap operas.

E. STENDERS, M.R. DALE
& HOLLY OAKES.

... Making capital out of silly names during the worst financial crisis since, well, the last one, is frankly not on.

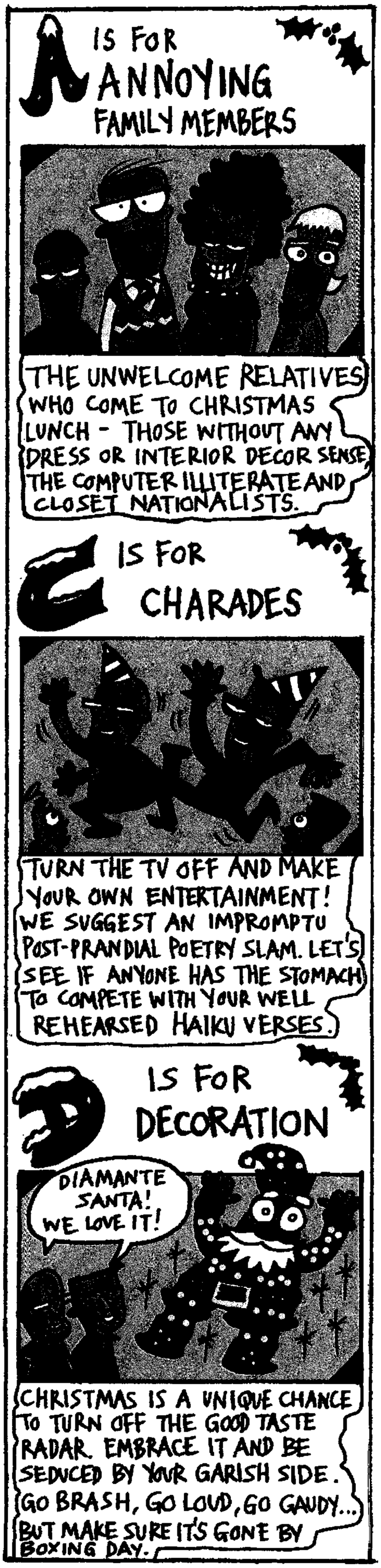
Yours (quite literally),
BRAD FORDENBINGLEY.

... The constant dribbling of these letters in your magazine should be stopped.

CATH ETER.

GRIM UP NORTH LONDON XMAS GLOSSARY

by KNIFE & PACKER


A IS FOR ANNOYING FAMILY MEMBERS
THE UNWELCOME RELATIVES WHO COME TO CHRISTMAS LUNCH - THOSE WITHOUT ANY DRESS OR INTERIOR DECOR SENSE, THE COMPUTER ILLITERATE AND CLOSET NATIONALISTS.
C IS FOR CHARADES
TURN THE TV OFF AND MAKE YOUR OWN ENTERTAINMENT! WE SUGGEST AN IMPROMPTU POST-PRANDIAL POETRY SLAM. LET'S SEE IF ANYONE HAS THE STOMACH TO COMPETE WITH YOUR WELL REHEARSED HAIKU VERSES.
D IS FOR DECORATION
DIAMANTE SANTA! WE LOVE IT!
CHRISTMAS IS A UNIQUE CHANCE TO TURN OFF THE GOOD TASTE RADAR. EMBRACE IT AND BE SEDUCED BY YOUR GARISH SIDE. GO BRASH, GO LOUD, GO GAUDY... BUT MAKE SURE IT'S GONE BY BOXING DAY.

Letter from **Goma**

from Our Own Correspondent

GREAT NEWS! The UN is to send another 4,000 peacekeepers here to eastern Congo. As UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon says, it's outrageous that a million of us are trapped between the battle lines facing starvation and disease.

Yet forgive us if we're picky. Our useless government in distant Kinshasa has just turned down an offer of 3,000 Indian troops to come and protect us – and for once we agree. Here in North Kivu, confidence in our Indian military brothers and in Mr Ban's UN is heading south faster than the murderous brigands of General Laurent Nkunda's militia.

A while back the Indian army exonerated itself from accusations that its peacekeepers had been selling weapons and ammunition to one of our many militias in return for gold, ivory and marijuana. The BBC and Human Rights Watch, who made the allegations and quoted hundreds of pages of a hushed-up UN inquiry into the affair, may have got it wrong. If so, why did the Indian army seize control of the investigation, dismiss all serious charges and issue mild rebukes to three officers?

Colonel Chand Saroha, until earlier this year one of India's top commanders in eastern Congo, faced a trickier problem. He was recorded at a public meeting in Kivu in April with warlord-of-the-moment Laurent Nkunda and Jean Bosco Ntaganda, who are wanted by the international criminal court (ICC) in connection with war crimes investigations. Saroha told his hosts UN peacekeepers were not permitted to meet the rebels in such circumstances but their "good conduct, good discipline... made us feel we were associated with proud people. We are like brothers." Saroha was speaking for himself and in no way reflected the good work the UN's MONUC peacekeepers are doing in Congo.

Then there are reports in the UN mission that the Indians grounded attack helicopters preparing to engage Nkunda's forces some weeks ago - after the rebels had threatened to attack an Indian base near the border with Uganda.

Presiding over our latest disaster is MONUC's top official, Alan Doss. A British diplomat and UN veteran, he complains that his $10,000-a-month residence in Kinshasa is inadequate (as presumably is his paltry $4,000 entertainment allowance). This week he said he didn't think the solution to our problems lay "exclusively in military force". Perhaps not. But things look different if you're huddled under a makeshift tent and the UN peacekeepers and government troops run away when the rebels attack. Now Mr. Doss tells us it will take another two months for UN reinforcements to arrive.

Meanwhile in Brussels the foreign ministers of European countries whose mine companies grew fat on our mineral largesse, tell us they can't spare their own troops to help save lives in the Congo. Instead, the UN has sent Olusegun Obasanjo, former president of Nigeria, to patch things up. This is the same Obasanjo who was condemned by human rights groups for ordering troops to lay waste to villages suspected of harbouring militants in the Niger Delta.

Obasanjo was here when Congo first fell apart after independence in 1960. As a former peacekeeper, he may have some sympathy for those blue helmets far from home who find comfort in our lady folk. Mr Ban, however, said in August he was "deeply troubled" after an internal investigation confirmed allegations of "sexual exploitation and abuse" by UN peacekeepers.

Obasanjo is getting on well with General Nkunda, a fellow born-again Christian and soldier of Christ. But it will take more than that to deal with a crisis that's been brewing for 120 years. Since the days of Belgium's King Leopold, tiny self-appointed cliques have prospered here while holding the people of Congo in contempt. Signs are this is not going to change any time soon.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "I hate perfume," Christopher Brosius told reporters from his gallery in New York, "because it is a substitute for true allure and style. It is an ethereal corset, trapping everyone in the same unnatural shape, an arrogant slap in the face from across the room, an opaque shell that conceals everything while revealing nothing. People who smell like everyone else disgust me. That's why I opened the I Hate Perfume gallery, to encourage people to be themselves.

"Each customised scent I create is unique, a blend of the ethereal, the intellectual, and the hedonistic. 'In the Library' is the scent of a signed first edition of an English novel, in Russian and Moroccan leather bindings, with worn cloth. 'Narcissus' is clean running water over mossy stones, with the wind blowing gently through green leaves. 'Eternal Return' is the scent of sailing toward the shore, a blend of fresh ocean air, wooden ship, and a faint hint of cypress trees growing on the cliff above the water. 'Winter 1972' is a field of untouched new fallen snow, hand-knitted woollen mittens covered with frost, a hint of frozen forest and sleeping earth. 'Memory of Kindness' is the shining green scent of tomato vines growing in the fresh earth of a country garden. Prices start at $60 for a 15ml bottle. Please note that at I am extremely busy, and will not be accepting new custom clients until the summer." *(Art & Society 17/1/07 and cbihateperfume.com. Spotter: David Dallison)*

– ● –

● *"When we commissioned this fountain for Burj Dubai Lake, we knew it would be one of the world's finest water features, integrating water, music, and light into a grand spectacle. Powerful water nozzles shoot sprays to the height of a fifty-storey building, while over 6,600 lights and 50 colour projectors create a visual spectrum of over 1,000 different water expressions. By holding a competition to choose a suitable name for this fountain, we wanted to engage the residents of Dubai in the creation of a new landmark for the city, and to demonstrate the spirit of solidarity among UAE residents. The response to the competition has been overwhelming, with more than 4,000 participants from over 100 nationalities taking part. Entries were received from across the globe, reflecting Dubai's growing global significance.*

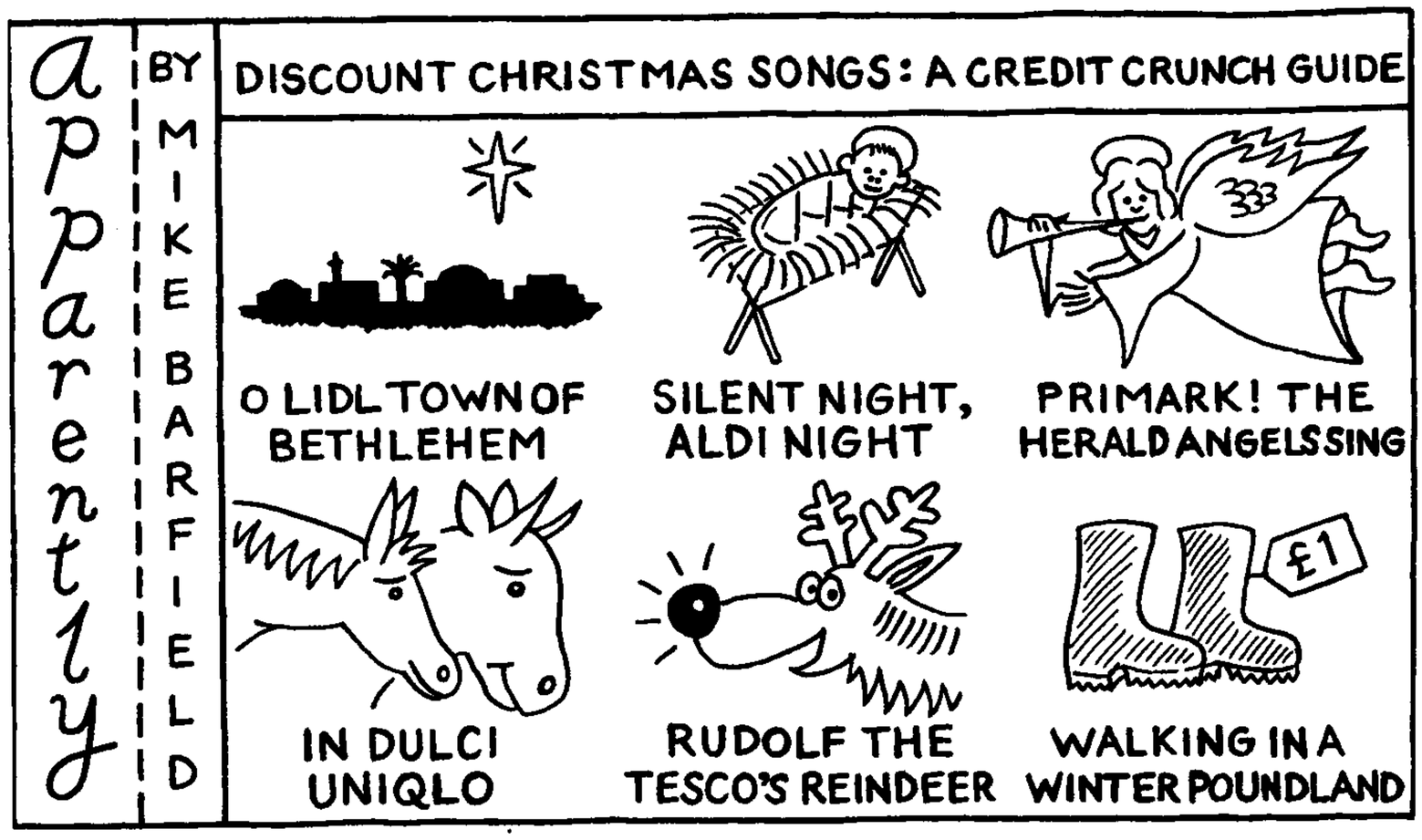
"What we were looking for was a name for the fountain that is simple, has instant brand recall, and above all celebrates the global standing of Dubai as a multicultural destination, and home to over 180 nationalities. On September 15th, a distinguished panel met and selected the winning name, which echoes the rising global prominence of Dubai, and will be a fitting tribute to the city. The name they have chosen is 'Dubai Fountain'." (Emaar press release, 26 /10/08. Spotter: Anon)

– ● –

● "When we began our research," Dr Val Curtis of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine told reporters, "we had no clear idea of what to expect. But we were flabbergasted to find that more than one in four British commuters have faecal bacteria on their hands. We swabbed and tested the hands of 409 people at bus and train stations in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Cardiff, and Newcastle, and the further north we went, the more often we found faecal bacteria. Men in Newcastle were the

worst offenders, with 53% harbouring bacteria. But in London, Cardiff, and Birmingham, the women had dirtier hands than the men. At Euston, only 6% of men were contaminated.

"Surprisingly, manual workers were less likely to have contaminated hands than other groups, such as professionals, students, retired people, or the unemployed. And people who used the bus had a higher rate of contamination than those who used the train. If any of these people had been suffering from diarrhoea, the potential for it to be passed around would be greatly increased by their failure to wash their hands after using the toilet. These results should be enough to make anyone reach for the soap." *(Nursing Times, 17/10/08. Spotter: Donald Gregory)*



PRIME MINISTERIAL DECREE NO. 33

From the Desk of the Supreme Leader

Comrades,

I would first like to thank all those who have been sending me messages of congratulation for my Supreme Leadership of the world in solving the global financial crisis.

Let me quote one typical letter taken at random, sent in by Comrade Mrs Ludmilla Mandelson, a hard-working pensioner from Notting Hill.

"Dear Supreme Leader.

You do not know me, but I am a single hard-working pensioner living in Notting Hill. Thanks to your tireless efforts and generosity, I shall be able to stay nice and warm this winter, and when my home is repossessed, I will not have to move out for two years.

Also the lap-dancing club next door to my nice, warm, hard-working flat will, quite rightly, be closed down. And young people will no longer be encouraged to get drunk by our local supermarket making dangerous 'three for two' alcoholic beverage offers.

All this will make Britain a very much happier and more peaceful place to live in, for me and millions of hard-working family pensioners like me. Comrade Brown, we salute you. You are like Moses, leading your people into the promised land flowing with milk and money.

Yours, Comrade Mrs Ludmilla Mandelson (no relation)"

What could be more heartening for me, as I continue to lead mankind out of the financial catastrophe that American capitalists have brought upon the world, to read such unsolicited tributes as they flood in their millions into my office.

What a contrast this is to the tiny minority of hysterically carping neo-Cameronite stooges who have been attempting to destabilise the Supreme Leader by the childish leaking to the media of top-secret state documents illicitly stolen from government offices by a treacherous hireling of the Bullingdon claque.

Thanks to the prompt and firm action of our patriotic state police, the KGB (Keep Gordon Brown), these criminal machinations have been brought to light and the hated Green has rightly been put under arrest.

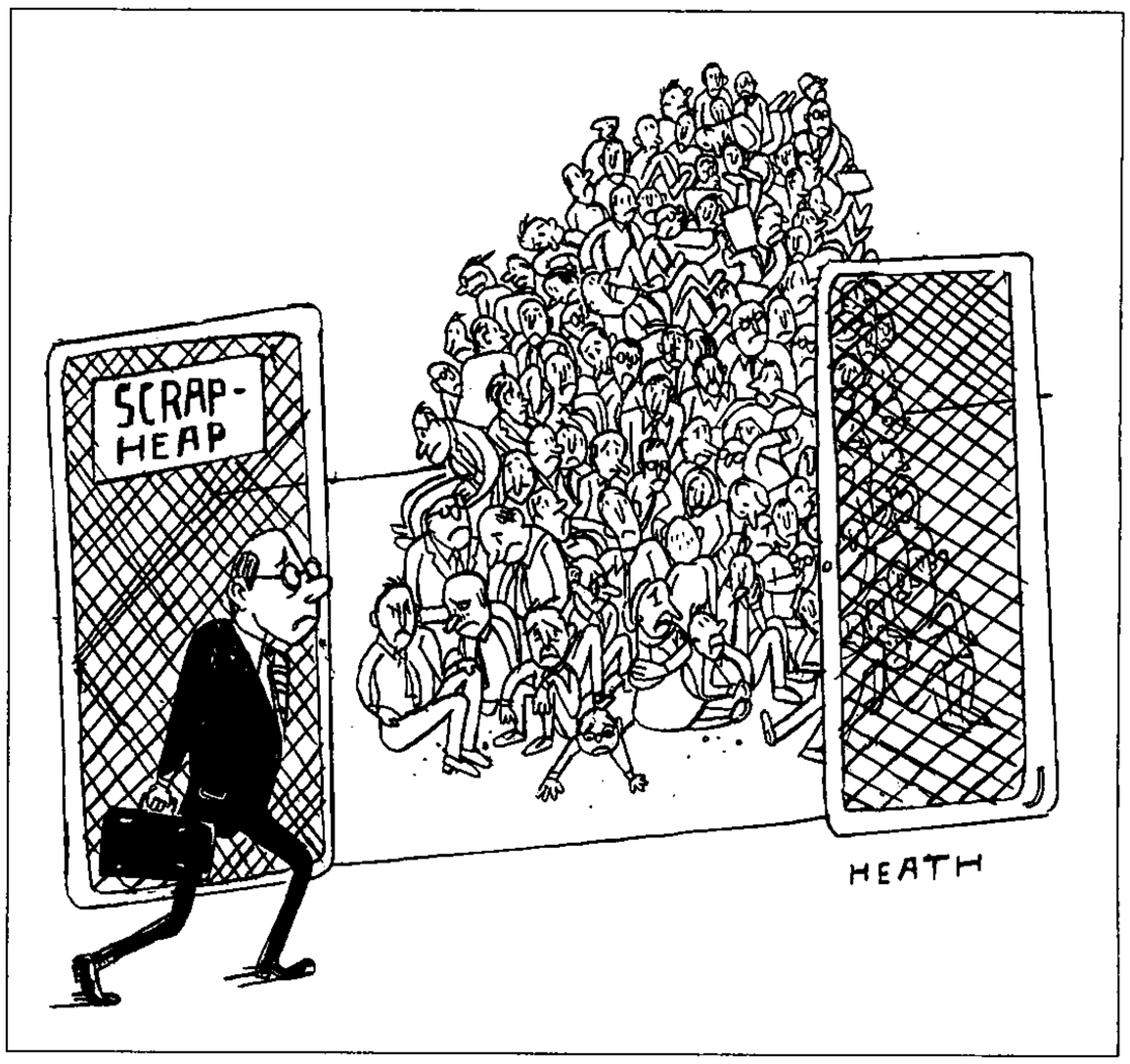
No doubt he and his accomplice Galley, whom he has groomed to betray state secrets, will shortly face a People's Court, charged with improper use of a Home Office photo-copier and high treason.

Let this be a salutory warning to all officials of the state apparatus, and indeed to all citizens, who think that they are free to criticise the actions of the Supreme Leader at a time of national crisis.

I must appeal to all comrades for constant vigilance in rooting out any sign of such deviationist, reactionary and subversive backsliding wherever it maybe found, and ensuring that it is reported at once to the appropriate authorities, so that the necessary action may be taken by the KGB. (Only the names of such traitors are required since Comrade Lord Mandelson already knows where you all live!)

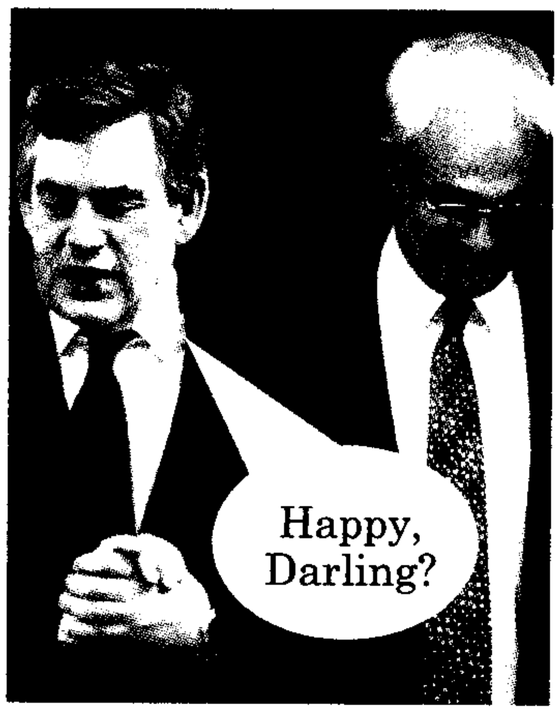
Gordon Brown

The Supreme Lender



LABOUR CAMP HUMOUR

Economy under threat



Freedom under threat

HUMAN RIGHTS — STRAW LASHES OUT

by Our Political Staff **Paul Dacresofthisstuff**

THE Justice Secretary Mr Jack Straw today called for a total reform of what he called "the disastrous Human Rights Act".

In particular, he demanded protection of the right to publish strident pieces in the Daily Mail.

I'm All Rights Jack

"It is a very basic human right," he told myself, "to come up with stirring populist headlines that might win us a few votes from Mail readers.

"This is second only in importance," he continued, "to the right not to carry out any of my suggestions because they might lose us a few votes from Guardian readers."

Mr Straw's brave stance was applauded by himself and *(cont. p. 94)*

TOXIC IRISH VOTES WITHDRAWN

by Our Civil Liberties Staff **Henry Porker**

THE highly dangerous Irish "No" vote has been withdrawn by the European Union after fears that it might contaminate the rest of Europe.

Porky Pie

EU officials are claiming that the "No" vote contains dangerous levels of democracy which could cause immense harm to Europe's constitution.

"The Irish 'No' votes leave a nasty taste in the mouth," said EU spokesman Frank Furter.

"We insist they are replaced by an alternative with at least an 80% content of 'Yes' votes. Only this will satisfy the criterion laid down by the EU for healthy referendum."

FACT: In the UK, votes of any kind are considered so dangerous that they have been discontinued by Gordon Brown. The public are advised that they are much safer if they avoid voting at all.

"We do prefer the clothes off the body"

Old Nursery Rhymes

This little piggy went to market
This little piggy stayed at home
This little piggy ate carcogenic dioxins
This little piggy had none
And this little piggy went wee, wee, we must remove all the Irish pork from the shelves at once!

FILM PREVIEW

FROST/BAILIFFS

The gripping story of a series of cat and mouse interviews between the disgraced Sir David Frost (Frank Langella) and the then little-known bailiff (Michael Sheen) following Frost's spectacular fall from grace after the multi-million-pound property firm he chaired collapsed into administration.

Eye rating – Frosty!

Top tips for saving the planet from GMTV's eco expert Joanna Yarrow

Scotland on Sunday

School news

St Cakes Scholarships

Applications for places at the prestigious West Midlands independent fee-paying school for boys and girls (Motto: "Quis Paget Entrat") should be sent to the Bursar, Major BNP Spanker-Mosley O.C., by 1 January at the latest. There are a limited number of 800 places and candidates will have to prove that they have sufficient money before being granted admission. Interviews will take place over the Internet, and will involve a simple arithmetical test – "Can you key in your father's PIN number?" Applicants are warned that St Cakes will only accept candidates who demonstrate a proven ability to pay in advance.

NOTICE: Recession Term begins on 7 January 2009 and continues until 24 December 2015.

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam:
Sunny von Bülow

So. Farewell
Then Sunny von
Bülow.

American heiress
And suspected
Murder victim.

You were played
In the film
By Glenn Close.

And now
Your life has
Drawn to one.

Klaus von Thribb (17½ years, overturned on appeal)

WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR ANY MORE

Wogan *(for it is he)*: Well, thank God that one is over and now a fine little ditty from the good people of Kurdistan and I think the lady in the pink bikini is the one who's singing the song or it could be the fella on the trapeze who cares? ah, the drink's beginning to kick in and about time too…oh, and would you believe it, Kazakhstan have given the Russian song, "We'll Cut Off Your Oil This Christmas" douze points, well what a surprise and guess what our plucky UK entry "Boombangabust" has got? nul points from everyone isn't that grand I'm thinking or rather I'm drinking... full marks for the Scotch or is it Irish... now come in Helsinki or is it Heldrinki? *(cont for 94 hours)*

POLLY FILLER on the Mama Mia Phenomenon

NORMALLY, it's just the sort of thing I hate. Soft-centred, sentimental, escapist, and worst of all, a musical! Added to which, I have always hated Abba, Meryl Streep leaves me cold, Piers Brosnan gives me the creeps and Colin Firth makes me want to shout at the screen.

But as soon as I put on the DVD (and my partner, the Useless Simon, walked out to watch Boris Johnson on Top Gear on Dave Gold 2 Plus One in the kitchen), I knew that Mama Mia was the best film in the history of the cinema.

Why? It's big-hearted, emotional and a world away from the boring grind of everyday life. And it's got great music by the Swedish pop legends Abba. Not to mention a wonderfully warm performance by Meryl Streep, the dishy Piers Brosnan giving me goosebumps and Colin Firth who makes me want to scream at the screen with laughter!

BUT YOU know what really made me like Mama Mia?

The fact that everybody else does! I'm certainly not going to sit here looking like a sour-faced old killjoy whilst Rachel Johnson and Jenni Murray, and even Jeanette Winterson, for God's sake, are getting their faces in the paper saying how great it is! If every other female journalist of a certain age is jumping on the bandwagon, Polly Filler is not going to be left out!

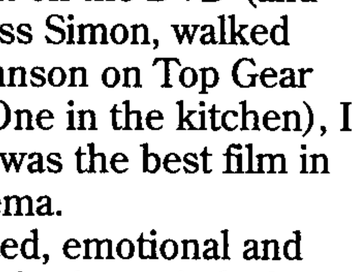
No way, Fernando! So let's hear it for Mama Mia!

And if they are looking for a Polly Filler quote for the DVD case, how about *"It's Mama Mania! This show is Abba-solutely Fabba-ulous! Now gimme gimme gimme my money money money before midnight!"*

© All newspapers.

KILLER ANT THREATENS BRITAIN

by Our Entomological Staff
Formick Jagger and the Beetles



SCIENTISTS warned last night that Britain is threatened by a new and lethal type of ant which could well undermine all civilised life.

The 'super ant' (or Ant Andec to give it its full name) bores its way into your living room through your television screen.

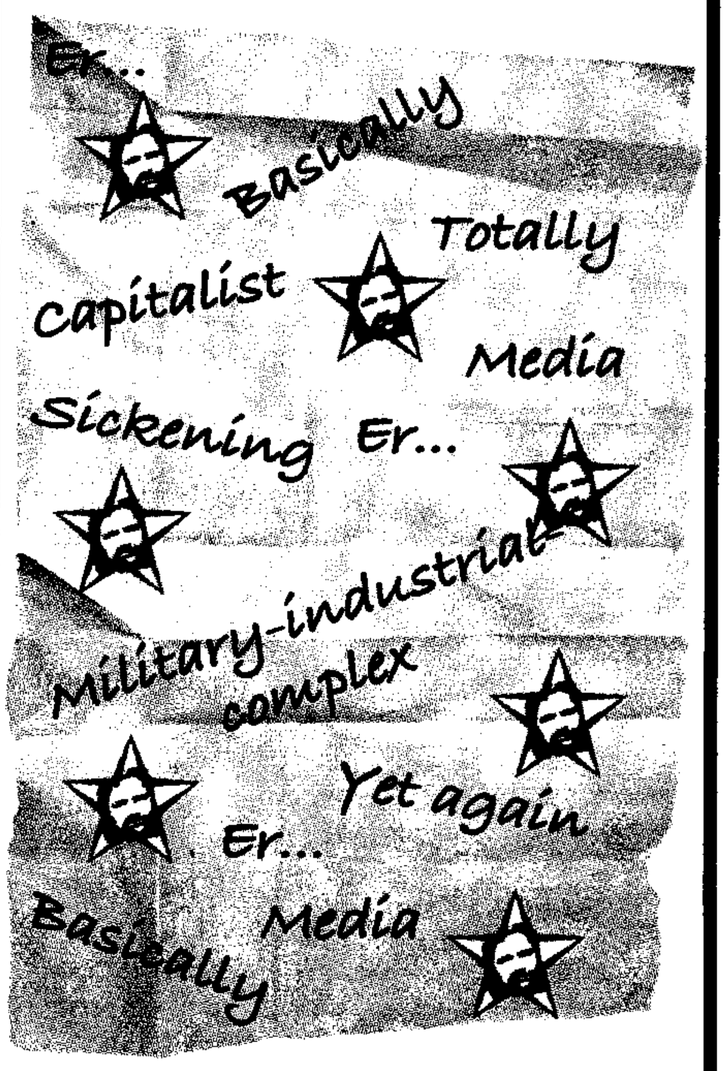
It then becomes impossible to get rid of. The government has warned householders to be particularly on their guard in the run-up to Christmas when the killer Ant Andec is most ubiquitous.

City Christmas Tree 2008

The Guardian | Friday December 12 2008

FREE Celebrity wrapping paper

No 94 Dave Spart



Everyday The Guardian is giving away 90 pages of free newspaper to go with your 80p worth of Celebrity Wrapping Paper. **Tomorrow** Dizzee Rascal's Rapping Paper (Adults only)

From The Message Boards

Members of the online community respond to the major issues of the day...

Violence at Lapland theme park

I hear the elves were involved in the worst of the fisticuffs. Sad to see these friendly little fellows succumbing to our yob culture. – ***Bogbrush***

wtf? there real ppl dressd up as elfs u muppet!!! – ***Matty_the_hammer***

The geezer that chinned santa wants locking up. He hit him for NOT letting kids sit in his lap. What kind of dad wants his kids to sit in a strange mans lap? Any santa comes near my girls I swear Ill do time – ***Family_man***

santa wud'nt let kid's sit on his lap? but its call-ed lap land? – ***Hayley_321***

The Daily Mail said one mother had to shield her daughter's eyes from the sight of Father Christmas smoking a cigarette outside the grotto. It was very upsetting and I cut the story out and shredded it in case my own kids saw it. Although too young to read, they are very bright for their age and often pick up on things. I comforted them but who knows what damage has already been done? – ***Emily***

Santa has to smoke outside the grotto?! It's elf'n'safety gone mad!! lol! – ***Danny_Daz***

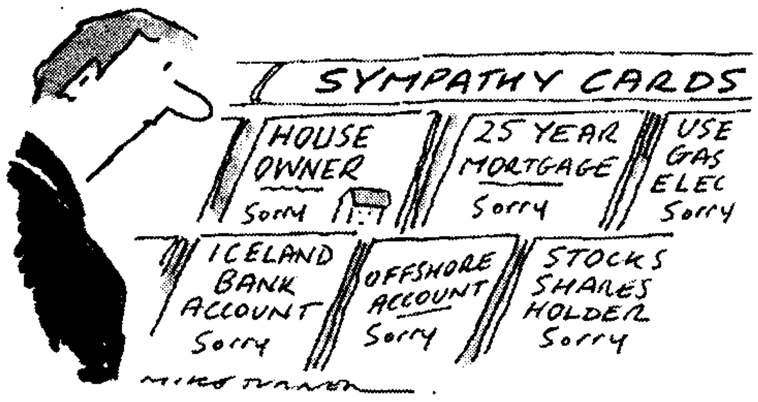
its a crime agenst chrismas thank god poor angel p was spared this in heven – ***Justice_4_Maddie***

Shannon Matthews verdict

my girls was watch-ing the toy story dvd an my sarah screams daddy daddy its her an started 2 cry an then my helen started an i rushd in wats the matter babe? an there both point-ing at the screen an scream-ing its the lady its the lady an my helen was hold-ing the paper with a pictur of mum=scum karen mathew's an buzz liteyears face looks exact-ly the same!!! r u proud of ur-self mumscum??????? u hav ruind my kids chrismas 4 ever – ***Broken_Britan***

ur right broken she looks just like buzz! i thaught that k**** m*****'* (u know whoe i mean) culd not sink any lowr "BUT" then she makes herself look like a kids film truly the lowst of the low – ***Eye_4_an_eye***

amazon is still sellin toy story dvd please sign my facebook partition 2 make them stop – ***Angel_dust***



GREENGATE CRISIS – DAY 94

'I Am Not To Blame,' Say All Those To Blame

by Our Entire Parliamentary Staff

A WEEPING Speaker Martin openly admitted that he was in no way to blame for having allowed the police to storm Parliament and arrest an MP.

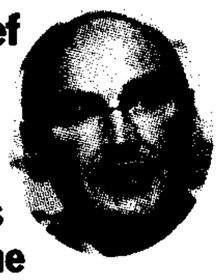
"It is true," he said, bringing out several onions simultaneously, "that I was told about this outrage in advance, but it is not my job to decide who is allowed to storm Parliament and arrest MPs. That is the job of that silly woman Mrs Pay, who was foolish enough to accept the job of Serjeant-at-Arms when I offered it to her, even though she knew she was a token woman who was only brought in on my advice to annoy the Queen."

Fighting back his tears, the Speaker continued, "I am not to blame for the fact that the police did not even have a warrant before forcing their way into the House of Commons. I can hardly be expected to ask every policeman who wants to storm Parliament whether they have some piece of paper or other to authorise them to do so.

"As I said earlier, that is the job of the silly woman with the horrible purple hair, who insisted, entirely against my better judgement, on accepting the job I gave her.

"Most of all," concluded the Speaker, "I am not to blame for being completely useless at my job. That is entirely the fault of New Labour and the snobbish public schoolboy Tony Blair who wanted a chippy, working-class Glaswegian toady in the chair to make it look as if Labour was still a working class party. And a fat lot of good it's done them all. Boo hoo hoo."

'I Am Not To Blame,' Says Top Policeman



ASSISTANT Chief Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson angrily denied last night that he was in any way to blame for the appalling blunder he had made in ordering his men to storm Parliament without a warrant and arrest an MP.

"It is not my job," he said, "to check whether we have a warrant or not before we break into other people's premises. I leave that to my subordinates, like that ghastly little man, Bob Quick, who thinks he can beat me to the job of Britain's top policeman.

"And, anyway," Sir Paul continued, "if anyone is to blame for this fiasco, it is Boris Johnson, the London Mayor, for his interference in what is an operational police matter.

"Mr Johnson should have known that this matter was entirely my responsibility, except, of course, that it wasn't."

'Cripes! I Am Not To Blame,' Says Boris

A FURIOUS Mayor of London, Mr Boris Johnson, last night dismissed any suggestion that he was in any way to blame for the police operation against his friend Tory MP Damian Green.

"It would be entirely improper," said the Mayor, "for me to prejudge the police investigation into my friend's affairs, though it's pretty bloody obvious that the whole thing was a complete cock-up from start to finish, and a put-up job by Gordon and his boys to discredit Bojo and his mates in Parliament.

"If you ask me, I blame that ghastly woman, Jacqui Smith, but don't quote me."

'I Am Not To Blame,' Says Jacqui Smith

AN incandescent Home Secretary last night lashed out at critics who claimed that she was to blame for the entire Greengate crisis.

"It is not my job as Minister in Charge of the Police," said Ms Smith, "to supervise what the police get up to.

"It is true that I was quite rightly kept informed at every stage of what was going on, but I had no idea that the police were planning anything like this.

"If anyone is to blame for this fiasco, it is the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, for appointing me to this job, when he knew perfectly well that I was in no way up to it."

'I Am Not To Blame,' Says PM

A SMILING Gordon Brown last night denied that the so-called Greengate affair could in any way be pinned on himself.

"I am not to blame," he said. "It is all the fault of that incompetent booby, the Speaker, in whom I have complete confidence and *(continued at top of this page)*

Mail Comment On The Speaker

Quentin Letts writes: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.

Dave Snooty AND HIS PALS

MEANWHILE AT QUESTION TIME...
COME ON - NAME NAMES! WHO'S BEEN HELPING YOU TO DISCREDIT THE GOVERNMENT!?!?
ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! IT'S... GORDON BROWN!

POLICE TERROR ROCKS WESTMINSTER

Nation Stunned By Arrest Of Man They'd Never Heard Of

by Our Investigative Staff ***Jonathan Leak***

THE entire country was in deep shock last night as it faced the gravest *threat to* civil liberties in history.

Said one leading constitutional expert, world-famous historian Vernon Boggeroff, Professor of Constitutional Studies, University of the Wirrall (formerly Hoylake Golf Club), " This is the equivalent of tearing up the Magna Carta, and flinging it in the face of the British people."

What has caused the gravest constitutional crisis since the days of the Civil War? *(You've done this bit. Ed.)*

Nothing less than a dawn raid by hundreds of armed police officers on Parliament, followed by the arrest of prominent Tory frontbencher Damian Green on the charge of passing leaked official documents to journalists in the hope of getting his name in the papers.

MPs on both sides of the House were unanimous in condemning what elder stateman Tony Benn, 105, called "the grossest infringement of the ancient liberties of Parliament since the days of *(You've done this bit several times already. Ed.)*

Said Tory leader David Cameron, "This is worse than the worst excesses of Stalin's Nazi Germany. Soon we shall hear the tramp of jackboots outside our second homes, as Brown's black-shirted Stasi go through our expenses claims in the middle of the night, while one is trying to steam one's top hat ready for the morning."

London Mayor Boris Johnson also weighed in, saying, "Cripes, blimey, Mr Plod told me he wanted to finger chummy Green's collar and read a few of his old letters, but I didn't think they'd be stupid enough to actually do it. Strewth, it's worse than the Middle Ages – talking of which, have you seen my new telly series about us and Johnny Muslim?"

And it's not just MPs who are outraged by the police action.

Said one typical voter, Mr Michael Giggler (via email), "You mean they've arrested a Tory MP? That's terrible. They should have arrested the whole lot of them, ha, ha, ha."

MPs call for inquiry into police arrest

LEADING parliamentarians last night called for a full public inquiry into the arrest of Damian Green.

"This is unbelievable," said one. "The police have arrested someone, instead of shooting him 15 times in the head at point blank range."

He continued, "What on earth do the police think they were doing?"

A police spokesman, however, expressed his regrets at what he called "the non-shooting incident" and promised a full investigation into the catalogue of errors leading to "the tragic, non-fatal apprehension of the suspect".

"We must find out what went right," he said, "and do everything in our powers to stop it happening again."

BLACK ROD

The Ancient Ceremony In Full

Black Rod: Knock, knock!

Speaker: Who's there?

Black Rod: The Police.

Speaker: Do come in and arrest anyone you want.

Serjeant-at-Arms: Oyez, Oyez!

Dixon of Damian Green

Daily Mail, Friday, December 12, 2008

Alzheimer's Xmas Appeal

AS PART of our ongoing Christmas appeal, today we highlight the shocking plight of one elderly and confused newspaper, the *Daily Mail*.

For the past decade, the *Daily Mail* has consistently vilified the European Court of Justice, claiming that it will destroy all the freedoms we know and love under the jackboot of judges working on behalf of the Euro super-state.

So how can the same paper now be full of fulsome praise for the wisdom of the European Court of Justice, after its judges ruled that the government must destroy the DNA of all innocent people held on the DNA database?

Clearly, this once confident and active newspaper is now so hopelessly senile that it is forgetting what it writes from one day to the next as it gropes around shambolically *(That's enough, Ed.)*

THE BROON-ITES
THE SCOTTISH SCALLIWAGS SCURRYING AWAY FROM THE SPEAKER!
Fountain and Jamieson
IT'S ALL VERRA WELL THOSE SCUNNERS BLEATIN' ABOOT DAMIAN GREEN, BUT IT'S A VERRA SERIOUS BUSINESS, THA' NOO...
AYE!
THE POLIS ARE FULL WITHIN THEIR RIGHTS TAE TAK' TH' FULL MEASURE O' THE LAW WHEN DEALIN' WI' TH' CONSTANT LEAKING O' VITAL GOVERNMENT BUSINESS...
RESERVED FOR ~~PETER HAIN~~ DAMIAN GREEN
AH ONLY HOPE WE LEARN OOR LESSON SOMETIME SOON!
BIRD SEED
JINGS, PRISONS AND HELPMABOAB!
CLANG! CLANG!
FILE
DUNDEE CAKE
HENRY DAVIES

THAT DE MENEZES CORONER'S SUMMING UP IN FULL

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,

You have been sitting for some weeks with only one thing in mind. That you should be able to pronounce judgement on the conduct of the Metropolitan Police Force, namely Officers P, B and W, Superintendent Q and Chief Inspector Z. But it is my duty to advise you that, as the law stands, it is not in your remit to have any view of the matter whatsoever. You must strike it from your mind, as if you had never been present in this court.

You have heard several different accounts of these tragic events from a variety of witnesses, all of whom agree that the police opened fire on Mr Menezes with no warning, despite having no idea who he was. You have also witnessed the distressing sight of the deceased's mother, a foreign lady whom you might easily mistake for an illegal immigrant, who, being foreign and emotional, has been unable to control her feelings on a number of occasions, as we heard various policemen describing how they murdered her innocent son at the railway station in question. You are also to put this poor, unbalanced woman from your mind, as you reach the verdict which I shall now instruct you to give.

Your options, ladies and gentlemen, under the principle *custodes nunquam culpabilis*, are as follows. If you think that the police fired 15 bullets into Mr Menezes's head entirely in good faith, which was understandable, you may think, given the state of terrorist anarchy prevailing in the capital at the time, then you may deliver a verdict of "unfortunate killing".

If, on the other hand, you believe that the police made an entirely innocent mistake, and killed someone who might easily have been Osama bin Laden's right-hand man, judging by the suspicious way in which he was walking along, sending text messages on a mobile phone device before descending the escalator to board an underground train, then you must pronounce a verdict of "death by misadventure".

You may, alternatively, wish to commend the officers, whose evidence you have heard in this court, for the unfailing honesty of their testimony and their unflinching courage in standing up to the unwarranted attacks on their integrity made by various irresponsible members of the public – in this case, men and women who merely happened to be in the same railway carriage at the time, and whose memories of what they saw and heard may well be faulty, you may think, after the lapse of so much time.

And you will remember the moving sight of the brave, upright officer K9 who wept openly in the witness box, as he recalled how he warned the suspect repeatedly that he was a policeman and asked him to lay down his guns before reluctantly discharging his weapon into his head.

I must emphasise that the one verdict which you are not allowed to give is that of "unlawful killing by the police". Were you to be reckless enough to do so, you would each be charged with the very serious crime of delivering an unlawful verdict, which carries a maximum penalty of death, and I would have no choice but to sentence you to be taken from this place to an underground station and there to be shot by highly-trained police marksmen until you are dead.

Damning Childcare Report Into Damning Childcare Reports

by Our Social Work Correspondent **Phil Formzin**

A DAMNING childcare report was released today damning a damning childcare report released two days ago.

This damning report highlights systemic failures in the way the damning childcare report damned a previous damning childcare report into damning allegations that the damning childcare reports weren't sufficiently damning.

Ministers said that in the wake of this latest damning childcare report into the systemic failure of damning childcare reports a damning childcare report into this latest damning childcare report would be *(cont. for 94 years)*

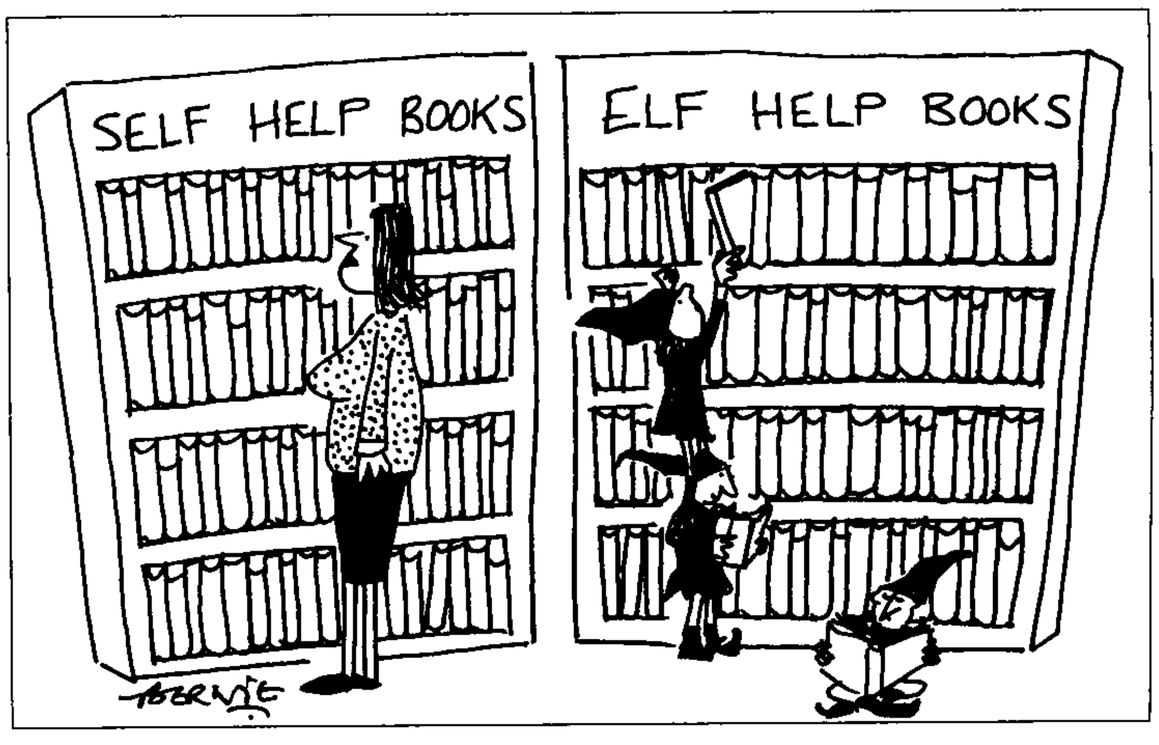
BRIT-LAND TO BE CLOSED DOWN

by **Chris Mass-Disappointment**

THE controversial "Brit-Land", which received thousands of complaints from disappointed visitors who described it variously as being "shabby", an "over-priced rip-off" and "nothing like it looked in the brochures", is to be closed.

"We took a look at 'Brit-Land' and we agreed that it was totally sub-standard,"said a gobsmacked senior trading standards officer.

"It was meant to be a jolly place ruled over by a happy fat man, but we found it to be a run-down cesspit featuring a wizened old misery-guts."



KP'S MEN SAY YES TO INDIA BUT ONLY WITH SAS SUPPORT

by Our Cricket Correspondent
GEOFF BORECOTT

THE England cricket board has agreed to allow the national team to return to India to be beaten in two more Test Matches, so long as they can be given round-the-clock protection from terrorist outrages.

These are the six security measures they are demanding as a pre-condition of their playing.

1. Team to be guarded at all times, on and off the field, by 200 elite SAS Special Forces redeployed from Afghanistan.

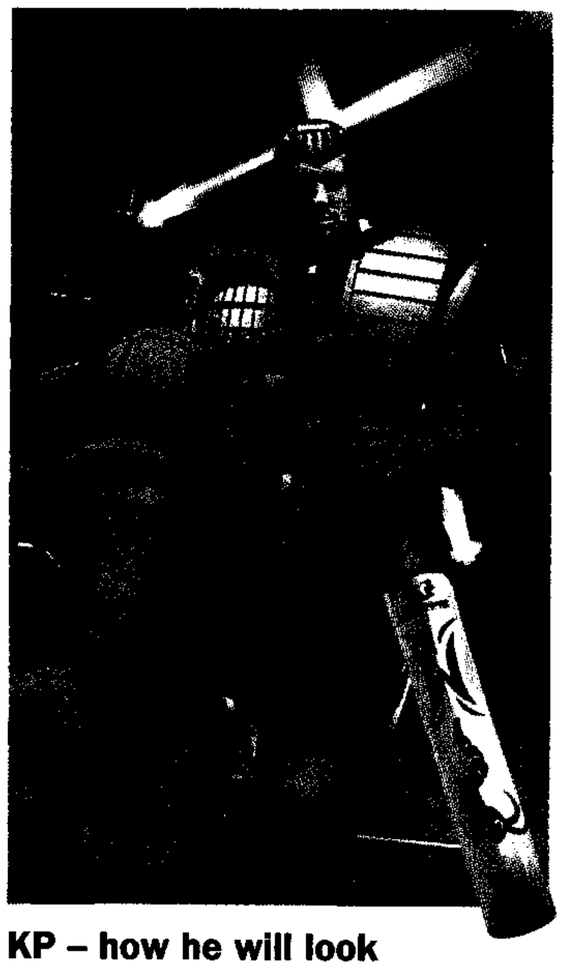
2. Batsmen and fielders to be given full body armour, sufficient to withstand rocket-propelled grenades and Pakistan nuclear weapons.

3. No spectators shall be allowed for any games, and the area round the ground shall be evacuated no later than six hours before start of play.

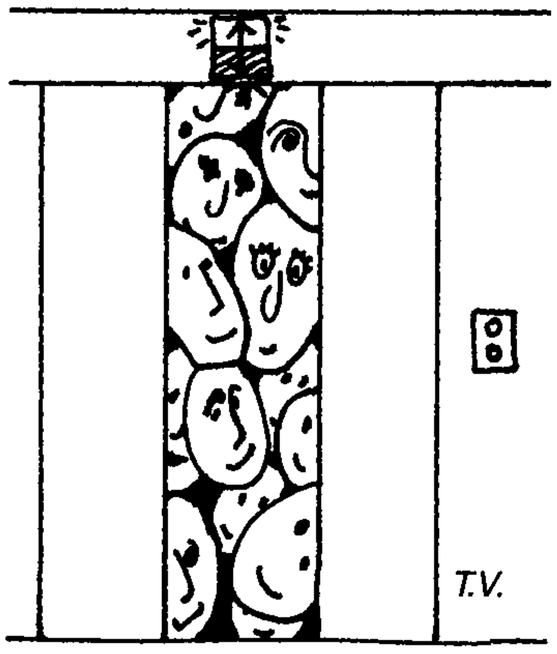
4. Star Wars-type anti-missile system to be installed on pavilion roof to intercept al Qaeda-style aerial attacks.

5. Indian Ocean to be drained to forestall sea-borne attacks by Pakistani terrorists.

6. All sacred cows in India to be retrained as "sniffer dogs", to detect any whiff of Islamist extremism amongst cricket-loving population.



KP – how he will look



Face lift

EXCLUSIVE TO ALL PAPERS

An Apology

IN RECENT months we may have given the mistaken impression through articles such as 'Cut Rates Now', 'They Must Come Down Now' and 'Rates Have to Fall' that we wanted the Bank of England to slash rates aggressively as the only way to restore confidence and reward prudent homeowners by lowering their mortgage payments to unprecedented levels thus getting the economy back on its feet.

We now realise, in the wake of the Bank of England aggressively cutting rates that nothing could be further from the truth, and that these panic measures only further damage confidence and punish prudent savers who see their rates slashed to unprecedented levels, thus plunging the country deeper into recession.

We apologise for any confusion, and for any confusion in the future when we get so confused we accidently stop spreading confusion.

"I've trained it to find old tea bags to re-use"

PRESS ROUND-UP: The Best of the Front Pages

THE Sun

DID MUMBAI KILLERS WORK FOR HARINGEY COUNCIL?

INSIDE on pages 2-94:
"Probably not" *(no page 3 today out of respect for Baby P)*

DAILY EXPRESS

BRITAIN TO RUN OUT OF MONEY 'WITHIN WEEKS'

Banks refuse to pass money onto public

Is Lord Mandelson behind a secret deal to source replacements from Euro currency?

the PREMIERSH*TS

PAUL WOOD

THE TROUBLE WITH THE PREMIER LEAGUE THESE DAYS...
IS THAT THERE ARE TOO MANY DODGY DECISIONS...
I MEAN, WHAT IS HE THINKING?..
PINK BOOTS?
YEH, I LOVE 'EM
ER...
YA BIG POOF!

The Zimbabwe Herald

THE FINAL INSULT:

UK GOV'T POURS CHOLERA INTO ZIMBABWE WELLS

Full proof on p94.

PLUS ***GET TOMORROW'S HERALD IN HARARE FOR JUST 20,000,000,000,000,000, ZIM $!***

DIARY

ALLISON PEARSON'S A-Z OF CHRISTMAS

AWAY IN A MANGER: No crib for a bed? That doesn't sound right to me. Where were the social services when the lovely, lovely "little lord" Jesus was attempting to lay down his sweet head? Right first time. Nowhere. And it makes me hopping mad.

BOXING DAY SALES: Ye gods! Like the rest of you, I'm feeling the full horror of the credit crunch. Quite a few of my offshore investments are continuing to take a real hammering, and I'm onto my poor beleaguered stockbroker each morning with fresh orders to buy and sell. Meanwhile, my long-suffering bank manager is begging me to go easy on the Boxing Day sales. But one thing I do know. However poor I become, I'd live in rags in the gutter rather than go and beg sick, swearing love-rat Gordon Ramsay for any loose change. Sorry, Gordon, but there just happens to be a little thing called dignity, even in these cash-strapped times.

CAROL SINGERS: There's one thing that keeps me awake at night. What if underage carol singers, in all their wide-eyed innocence, bless 'em, knock on the corrupt door of the disgraced Gary Glitter? And what if the man himself opens the door, clad in his one-piece silver bodysuit, singing "Do you want to be in my gang, my gang, my gang?" and beckoning them in. It doesn't bear thinking about. Let's hope those little mites have the sense to answer him with a defiant "Definitely not, you sick former superstar pervert!" and run away as fast as their little feet can carry them.

CATTLE ARE LOWING: Tell them to put a sock in it someone, puh-leeease! Isn't there anyone in charge around here? And could someone tell me why we pour money into the police coffers when they can't even stop those wretched cattle lowing, morning noon and night?

DECORATIONS: Britain is in the grip of Christmas Decorations Fever. We may not have any cash in our pockets, but at least we have our paper-chains and our tinsel. My only worry now – and it is a worry I share with millions of mothers, the nation over – is that sick, creepy convicted rapist Barry George – formally acquitted for the brutal murder of Jill Dando – will turn up at our door with a mad look on his face. What a way to ruin a family Christmas! No, that's one scenario that just doesn't bear thinking about.

ECSTASY: It makes me see red when I hear of a mother giving her little toddler the class A drug Ecstasy for Christmas. No, it hasn't happened yet, thank God, but it's the kind of thing that could happen all over Britain – and, believe me, I'll be shedding no tears when I see the wicked perpetrators behind bars.

FROSTY THE SNOWMAN: A corncob pipe. And a button nose. And two eyes made of coal. I'm sorry, but that's not someone I want my kids to go out to play with. For crying out loud, where are the relevant authorities when you need them?

HERALD ANGELS: Sorry, guys, I don't feel like all that harking. Did no one tell you there's a credit crunch on?

HO HO HO: What's so funny? Here the rest of us are, up to our necks in the credit crunch, worried stiff that we won't be able to afford those toys our beloved youngsters have been begging us for all year, and all the morbidly obese bloke in a beard can do is laugh. The best medicine for callous red-faced fattie Santa? A great big seasonal kick up the backside.

KIDS: I'm sorry, but Christmas is a time for the kids. And that's why we should never let depraved weirdo monsters remain unvetted by the social services before we allow them to come storming into our houses with sawn-off shotguns and ruin it for everyone.

LITTLE DRUMMER BOY: Overdone it with the Christmas Sherry, ladies? Head throbbing to bust? Then the last thing you'll want on Boxing Day morning is that Little Drummer Boy banging away on his drum, begging you to be his sex-slave. Unless, of course, when he takes off his bearskin, it turns out he's none other than dishy Hollywood hunk George Clooney, all set for some pa-rum-pum-pum-pumpy!

MORECAMBE AND WISE: For pity's sake, could someone please tell me why these modern Masters of Mirth are no longer permitted to light up our screens on Christmas Eve? I for one long to know what they think of Gordon Brown, Strictly Come Dancing and Prince William? Surely it can't just be because they are dead?

NATIVITY: You can keep your frankincense and myrrh, love – but memo to His Nibs – a little touch of gold wouldn't go amiss on my brand new Versace evening dress, whatever the bank-manager might tell you!

PLUM PUDDING: I know I speak for every sane member of society when I say there's one thing I certainly DON'T want to discover hiding in my plum pudding this Xmas, and that's the revolting Russell Brand, begging to bonk me, then threatening to broadcast our steamy dalliance to the world and his wife. Is there no stopping this foul-mouthed sex-pest?

RICHARD, SIR CLIFF: Once again, Britain is in the grip of Cliff Richard Fever. Sir Cliff's new single is already at No. 25. Doesn't it warm your cockles that there are still some things that we Britons can get right?

SANTA CLAUS: Once the festivities are over, I'd rather curl up with a good book than be a sex-slave. Sorry, Santa Darling, but I won't be letting you roast your chestnuts around MY open fire come Christmas night – not when I've just been given the new Joanna Trollope!

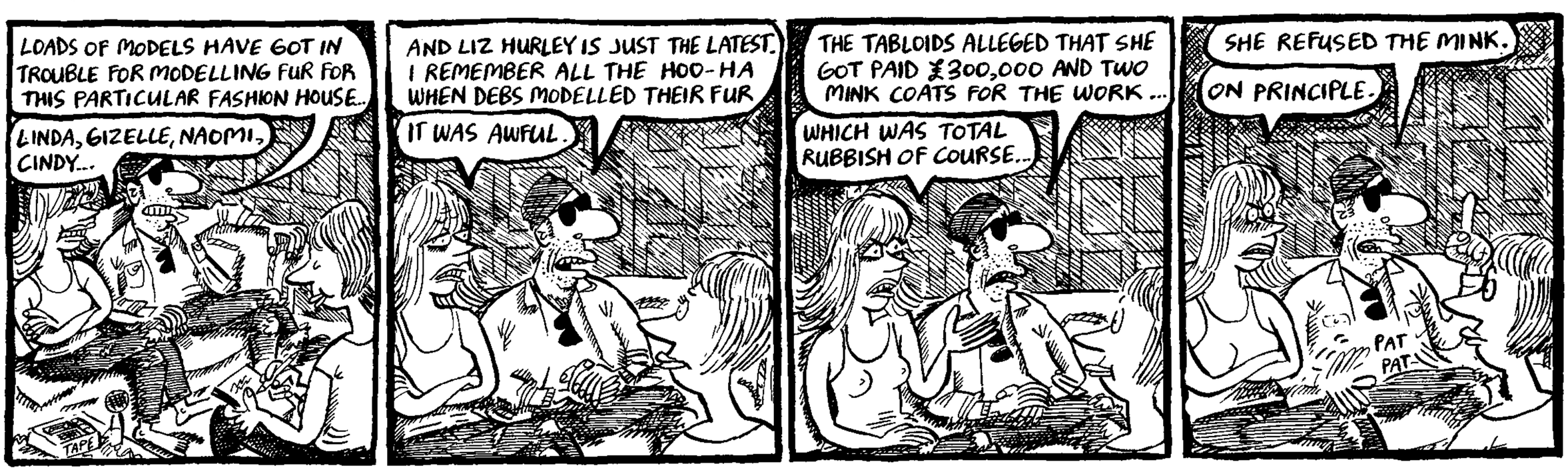
TURKEY: Don't get me wrong. I've nothing against turkey at Christmas. But one thing's for sure. When I see that great big turkey sitting there on the serving dish come lunchtime, I'll be double-checking it's not naked convicted sex-pervert Gary Glitter before I start serving it out with all the trimmings.

WRAPPING: What would I like to unwrap under the mistletoe on Dec 25? Right first time, ladies. Hunky actor Daniel Craig in his skin-tight swimming trunks!

XMAS PRESENTS: Every child deserves Xmas presents. But, please, mums, not too many. When I hear of a child being given five thousand Xmas presents or more it makes me hopping mad. Is this really the kind of country we all want to live in?

ZZZZ: We all have a right to a good sleep. But how can any woman in her right mind sleep soundly on Xmas night when convicted sex-pervert Barry George remains at large?

As told to
CRAIG BROWN


LOADS OF MODELS HAVE GOT IN TROUBLE FOR MODELLING FUR FOR THIS PARTICULAR FASHION HOUSE..
LINDA, GIZELLE, NAOMI, CINDY...
TAPE
AND LIZ HURLEY IS JUST THE LATEST. I REMEMBER ALL THE HOO-HA WHEN DEBS MODELLED THEIR FUR
IT WAS AWFUL.
THE TABLOIDS ALLEGED THAT SHE GOT PAID £300,000 AND TWO MINK COATS FOR THE WORK...
WHICH WAS TOTAL RUBBISH OF COURSE..
SHE REFUSED THE MINK.
ON PRINCIPLE.
PAT
PAT

Literary Review

Too much stuffing

Christmas cook books

"SOMETIMES I find it embarrassing when I see the amount of food that we, as a nation, waste," writes Gordon Ramsay in his latest fat tome, **Cooking for Friends** (HarperCollins £25). It's a complaint echoed by Delia Smith in her latest offering, **Frugal Food** (Hodder & Stoughton £17.99), where she says "An astonishing one-third of the food we buy is wasted".

No doubt some of this food is wasted trying out recipes from fancy new cook books which don't turn out like the ones in their beautiful colour illustrations. But at least the food is biodegradable. What happens to all the wasted recipes in unused cook books?

As with street lights and end-of-season sales, Christmas cook books always seem to come too many and too soon. I don't just mean the obvious festive cash-ins like **Nigella Christmas** (Chatto & Windus, £25), which has been on the shelves since early October, or Sarah Raven's **Complete Christmas** (Bloomsbury, £25), which has been around almost as long. I include all those big format full colour cook books from which few recipes are ever made more than once and which, massively overstocked in the run-up to Christmas, will soon end up remaindered in "bargain" bookshops.

Not that you need wait for them to be remaindered. Gordon Ramsay, currently the world's highest paid chef, and busiest (his recipe for double-dipped sausage is attracting a good deal of attention), can't shift his latest book at full price even when it's a signed copy, promoted by Richard & Judy. My copy from Waterstone's also had a "£10 off" sticker overstickered by another saying "half price".

Perhaps what puts off buyers is the fact that it's full of mugshots of himself, grinning or scowling at you every few pages. All his nice words about family life and getting the children to help buy the veggies from the farmer's market sound rather hollow now that we know his stove was fitted with two timers. As for the recipes themselves, they are fairly traditional, some with a modern twist. But you can find similar things in many other books. To take a seasonal example, he does his Brussels sprouts with pancetta and chestnuts. Just like Sarah Raven, in her Christmas book, and, er, just like Nigella Lawson in hers.

Another common factor in many of these books is a kind of bossy preachiness. You shall cook, and you shall jolly well enjoy it. Jamie Oliver in his latest, much lambasted, **Ministry of Food** (Michael Joseph £25), took his cue from the 1940s era of rationing and austerity; Delia takes hers from the 1970s energy crisis years. First published in 1976, her **Frugal Food** seems to have been republished every decade to coincide with slumps in the trade cycle. After reissues in 1987 and 1997, it has been wheeled out again to coincide with the credit crunch.

But do we really need another book telling us how to make do with less? Or indeed more of the same, since some of the recipes (eg lamb with coriander, or mustard coated chicken) are duplicated almost word for word in her **Complete Cookery Course**. That title reminds us that there was a time when Delia was taken seriously, a kitchen goddess in her own right. Even Gordon Ramsay was a fan, he says, until he chucked out all her books because he was so "distraught" at her use of canned mince (in this year's worst cook book, **How to Cheat at Cooking**, Ebury, £20). But perhaps what really bothered Gordon was the word "cheat" in the title. (If you can't stand the cheat, get out of hell's kitchen, say I.) *(That's enough Ramsay. Ed.)*

If Jamie and Delia are nostalgic for the comforting certainties (and comfort foods) of earlier decades, so in a sense is Nigella. But, judging from the illustrations in her book, her chosen era seems to be the late 1950s, the years of unalloyed plenty, when we "never had it so good". The opulence and gluttony of her vision of the perfect Christmas (which on her own admission has no Christian significance whatsoever) seems wildly out of tune with these lean and hungry times. Drinking jugs of cocktail made with prosecco (which she hilariously calls "Prozacco") and scattering pomegranate seeds over everything, she talks about "going into battle" and entering "the fray" as if serving lunch were a military operation. The whole thing is so over the top one is tempted to rename it "Christmas on the Titanic"

Sarah Raven's Christmas DIY manual is more tastefully done, and less bossy, and while adopting a similar concept of dividing the dishes into different days (Christmas Eve, the big day itself, Boxing Day etc), manages to include a wider variety of fare. There's also a lot about flowers, which helps justify heaps of glorious photographs. Yet both Sarah's and Nigella's books owe a good deal to Delia's forerunner, **Christmas** (BBC, £12.99), which is still in print and about half the price (though desperate discounting in the bookshops makes the newcomers marginally cheaper).

At the end of the day (or at any rate a latish lunchtime) all you need to know is how to cook a turkey and some vegetables and sauces to go with it, plus a pudding, a cake, and a few ideas for what to do with the leftovers. Anyone who needs to be told by a bossy cookery writer how to enjoy the holidays probably isn't going to anyway, and anyone who doesn't will resent it. And if I see another cranberry or cinnamon stick, I'll scream.

Books & Bookmen

■ EVEN the mighty HarperCollins isn't immune to the financial crisis.

Its Christmas party, normally a lavish affair, has been relocated to the reception hall of its office in Fulham Palace Road; and the marketing team from HarperCollins's Fourth Estate imprint have been reduced to going out carol-singing in Hammersmith to drum up cash for their New Year marketing campaigns.

■ HOW go things at the Friday Project, the much-hyped publisher which since April has been an imprint of HarperCollins – minus most of its authors and a reported £1.79m in debts to printers, freelance editors and designers, and already published writers who will never see a penny of their royalties, all jettisoned through a timely liquidation (*Eye* 1209)?

"This is a great opportunity for the Friday Project to flourish within the broad infrastructure of a larger organisation. We are looking forward to developing the Friday Project imprint in the way we had initially hoped when launching the company," announced managing director Clare Christian at the time.

So far that flourishing has amounted to the release of two titles – *The State of Me*, the story of a young woman suffering from ME in the 1980s by Nasim Marie Jafry, and *The Sonnets*, by Warwick Collins, a fictional account of Shakespeare's relationship with Henry Wriothesley. Neither particularly seems to match the Friday Project's stated aim "to focus entirely on developing brilliant books from great web content". Between them they have sold fewer than 200 copies.

Last week HarperCollins announced that Christian was leaving the Friday Project, which she co-founded in 2004, and would be "performing a broader publishing role within the press division of HarperCollins". Insiders believe this could be the most euphemistic job-swap within Murdoch's empire since David Yelland ceased to be editor of the *Sun* in 2003 to "take up a senior management role" at News Corporation.

■ RICHARD BOOTH, the self-proclaimed King of Hay-on-Wye, is on the verge of being dethroned.

At a packed meeting last week, a proposal by a group of fellow booksellers to replace the "kingdom" with a "commonwealth" or council of ministers received unanimous support. When "Bokassa" Booth returns from his holiday in Africa, he will be "arraigned for trial and almost certainly decapitated" by his peers in the Powys book town.

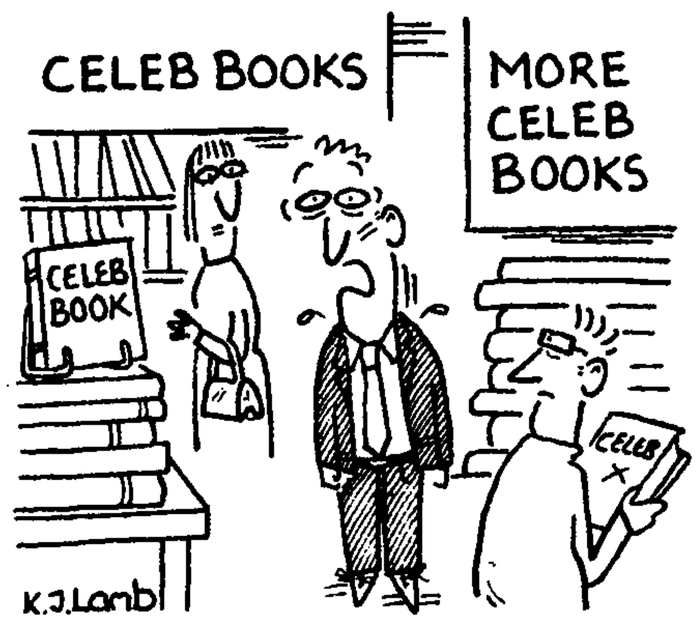
His most heinous crime is that he's perceived to have lost his touch for publicity. Whereas he once drew a lot of welcome attention to Hay with his antics, such as declaring the town an independent republic with its own currency called the "Bootho", he now spends most of his time and effort denigrating the Welsh assembly as a force for evil.

The revolutionaries, including Paul Harris of Oxford House Books, feel they could refocus the publicity on books, arts and the town itself, which needs all the help it can get to survive the recession. They also want to redress, at least partially, the creeping commercialisation of the Hay festival. One bemoans the way the annual literary event is now "dominated by centralised publishing, Sky TV and Barclays Wealth".

The move has been helped by Booth's sale of his main bookshop in 2005, which removed most of his power base. All those who led the proposal and voted for it acknowledge that they owe their livelihoods to Booth, but equally all agree that the time has come for him to abdicate.

"He's lost the plot," said one. "It's exactly like Thatcher."

'Bookworm'



"I don't want a celebrity book – get me out of here!"

Making the O'Grady

At My Mother's Knee... And Other Low Joints

Paul O'Grady

(Bantam Press, £18.99)

FOR celebrity autobiographies this Christmas, it's a fight to the death. This year's losers appear to include Jonathan Ross, whose so-called book is currently being outsold on Amazon by *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and the *Official High School Musical Calendar 2009*. The winners so far have been Dawn French, Julie Walters, Paul O'Grady and Michael Parkinson, with Fern Britton not far behind.

The preponderance of daytime TV presenters may come as a surprise, although it won't next year, when all the others publish their autobiographies. Which no one will buy, because by then we'll be on to something else.

Uninformed rumour had it, though, that the O'Grady book would be a bit of a misery memoir about his awful childhood on Merseyside. This would have been the jackpot as far as Bantam Press was concerned: Sharon Osbourne No 2, if you like, with an equally suspiciously smooth forehead. The only problem is, O'Grady didn't have an awful childhood.

Connoisseurs of his character Lily Savage (now retired) will know that he was only ever drawing on memories of his mother and his aunts – indeed, Savage was their maiden name. Now here they are in the flesh, as it were. The first mention of varicose veins comes on page 5. "It was a damp house as well, very damp... I'm surprised we didn't have a family of otters move into the back bedroom – the conditions were perfect."

With surprise, even delight, it slowly dawns on you that this is not like other celebrity autobiographies: it's a genuinely readable and enjoyable book. This reviewer has consumed maybe two dozen celebrity autobiographies over the past few years – some of them voluntarily – and this is by some distance the best: funny, well observed, recognisably human. Soon you start to wonder why all celebrity autobiographies can't be like this. Here's why...

● **Self-effacement:** O'Grady is more interested in writing about his relatives than himself. His childhood self only peeks through the gaps, but we learn more about him in this way (and like him more) than we learned from Eric Clapton and Russell Brand in their books, which found it almost impossible to acknowledge that anyone else had ever been alive.

● **The book stops at age 18:** And does so with a magnificent cliffhanger, so there's nothing about the dreary rise to stardom, his second home in Portugal (if he has one) and his celebrity mates. Just occasionally the adult O'Grady does take over and riff a bit about his dislike of restaurants and his fear of cancer, and your attention slips a little. But that's a few pages. Cliff Richard's book was all this, telling you everything he wanted to tell you but nothing you wanted to know.

● **Scores settled:** There are none. Compare with M-P White, G Ramsay and all other bitter, twisted celebrity chefs.

● **Chippiness and pomposity:** Again, none. Compare with at least one other chat show host (older, tarnished, Barnsley).

● **Involvement:** Jonathan Ross, you get the feeling, never had time to read his book. He dictated it, a minion typed it and, if you bought it, you felt foolish for having done so. There's an underlying contempt for the punter in this transaction – but from Ross, we expect no less. Whether O'Grady wrote the book himself or it was ghosted is unclear, but there's a writer's soul in there. He has a story to tell, and the desire and ability to tell it.

● **Not irredeemably vain or dim:** Compare with Jordan, Wayne and Coleen, Ronnie Wood etc.

● **Voice:** Many performers' stories lose something in the translation to the page, because their natural charm isn't there to help them. But while O'Grady is rather a sharp performer, not to all tastes, he is gentler and more charming on the page than on the screen. You hesitate ever to say this about a celebrity author, but it might actually be interesting to see what he writes next. (*Is it my imagination, or have you just written a glowing review? You're fired. Ed.*)

NEXT ISSUE:

CHRISTMAS LOG ROLLING

Books of the Year 2008

The *Eye*'s Bumper Backscratching Round-up!

LIBRARY NEWS

■ THE decision to close more than half the public libraries in Wirral can't be good news for the peninsula's "More Equal, More Prosperous" strategy to improve quality of life by 2025.

That plan, published just three months ago, included funding for a scheme "to improve the mental well-being of people and build community spirit through shared reading" to be run through libraries and community centres. But that was before the council's asset review earmarked most of the crumbling library buildings to be axed, due to "budgetary pressure".

Twelve branch libraries are to go, including those in some of the most deprived parts of the borough, along with an arts venue and three leisure centres. Birkenhead and Wallasey central libraries are also to close and will be replaced by "multi-purpose complexes". The council claims the move will save £3.7m a year.

Last December the government admitted that 40 public libraries had been lost in England during 2007, not to mention the six closures in Conwy (*Eye* 1186), which are counted separately. This year has seen yet more closures throughout the UK as well as cuts in staff and opening hours by many library services.

What Russell wants, he tells me, quite seriously, 'is to restructure, re-evaluate and change every single facet of our society to maximise the common good for as many people as possible.'

MIRANDA SAWYER interviews RUSSELL BRAND, *Observer*

Pseuds Corner

It was not a moment for partisanship, or personality, or even policy, but planet-wide poetry. Such moments do not come often in a lifetime and they are worth savouring.

MATTHEW D'ANCONA on the Obama victory, *Sunday Telegraph*

At this stage in the proceedings, the most likely place to find Diego Armando Maradona ought to be in the pages of his compatriot Jorge Luis Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*, alongside the stiff-bristled, mud-wallowing Catoblepas, the 100-mile-long Earthquake fish, the weeping, wart-covered Squonk and the Peryton of the ancient world – half-deer, half-bird, but casting the shadow of a man.

RICHARD WILLIAMS, *Guardian*

For the scholar of religion, there is much that is familiar about these talent shows and the huge audiences they gain. For a start, there is the humiliation on which the ITV shows in particular thrive, with viewers taking a particular delight in the rubbishing of contestants by the judges. It may seem an aspect of our contemporary culture of shaming and lack of respect, but in fact it closely mirrors the ritual humiliation visited upon shamans in primal societies and on sacred monarchs in the near east. We find its echoes in the Psalms and, indeed, in the mocking of Jesus by the crowds before his crucifixion.

IAN BRADLEY on 'The X Factor' and 'Britain's Got Talent', *Guardian*

Every time you shop, ask yourself: 'Does this purchase support or negate the type of change I want to see in the world? Is this purchase life-affirming or soul-draining?' Then take a deep breath, centre yourself and listen. I think you will know your answer.

AMANDA FORD, author of 'Retail Therapy: Life Lessons Learned While Shopping', BBC website

[Jose] Mourinho proved that he can change his tactical approach and face adversity head on. Those qualities alone may not make him an Ubermensch, but they show that there is definitely something Nietzschean about him.

GABRIELE MARCOTTI, *The Times*

CONTRIBUTORS: Jason Hazeley, Edward Huxley, Edward Ricketts, Andrew Murray, Oscar de Chazal, Nabil Hanafi.

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

PRESS FREEDOM

Murrer Xmas, Sally!

Sally Murrer

Sadiq Khan

EVEN as Inspector Knacker was preparing to raid MP Damian Green's parliamentary office, Scotland Yard's action was in effect already being declared unlawful by the judge presiding over the trial of respected local paper journalist, Sally Murrer (*Eyes passim*).

As Judge Southwell found, unless issues of national security are at stake, journalists and their sources are protected under the human rights act's article 10, governing freedom of expression over leaked material. Lawyers will argue the same legal protection is afforded to MPs going about their business.

Thus by the time the Met swooped on the Tory MP for Ashford and shadow immigration spokesman, Judge Southwell had the day before thrown out an almost identical case, involving misconduct in public office and leaked material, against Murrer and her former police partner and contact, Mark Kearney, and another former detective, Derek Webb.

The case became a *cause célèbre* for press freedom and has already caused Thames Valley police huge embarrassment – not least by highlighting the scandal of the bugging of human rights lawyer turned MP Sadiq Khan during visits to a constituent in Woodhill prison. Indeed, the three believe they were only targeted because Kearney, a former police intelligence officer, had protested about being ordered to eavesdrop on the MP, an action he believed to be unlawful. As the trio now prepare to sue police for unlawful arrest and detention, there will be even more red faces at Thames Valley.

Kearney was once a police press officer, paid to talk to reporters. That was how he and Murrer met. When crime stories appeared in Murrer's paper, the *Milton Keynes Citizen*, after he no longer held that post, Knacker apparently believed that money must have changed hands.

Murrer, a single mother with a severely autistic child, was arrested in May last year, strip-searched and detained, and had her home and office raided by Thames Valley police. Kearney, his son and Webb, a former detective turned private eye working for national newspapers, were similarly targeted. But even when it became clear that there was no corruption and no issue of national security, the trio were simply pursued for doing what all journalists and contacts do: discussing potential stories – some trivial, some already in the public domain. Hardly the crime of the century; but Webb maintains no fewer than 23 officers were involved in the heavy-handed raid on his house.

The trio are also claiming that material confiscated by police, some of it pointing to their innocence, has now "gone missing". That includes two of Webb's diaries and dozens of Murrer's notebooks. Transcripts of Murrer's interviews with police were found to have been doctored; and it has also emerged that two Thames Valley officers involved in the lengthy investigation were removed over unrelated disciplinary matters.

Webb is also claiming that when he was held in police cells he was wrongly denied medical treatment for eight hours and that when a doctor finally examined him, he needed emergency treatment in hospital for dangerously high blood pressure.

Thus a case that had wasted far in excess of £1m of taxpayers' money looks set to cost far more. But it is not just Inspector Knacker who has resorted to extraordinarily heavy-handed and costly tactics in this extraordinary case: the crown prosecution service embarked on an equally over-the-top response to head off reporters' inquiries about Webb's diaries.

The diaries apparently describe a number of sensitive surveillance operations Webb apparently carried out on behalf of tabloid newspapers and were said to involve senior government figures and members of the judiciary. Two government ministers as well as the former attorney-general Lord Goldsmith and the outgoing director of public prosecutions, Sir Ken Macdonald, were said to have been mentioned.

Goldsmith admitted an affair with a female colleague when confronted by tabloids last year; and soon afterwards the *Daily Mail* claimed Sir Ken had also had an affair with a young female barrister. But when one hack sought to check out whether any such sensitive claims might be behind the decision by the CPS not to return Webb's diaries, top libel lawyers Shillings were called in and he was suddenly threatened with an injunction and forced to sign an undertaking not to publish certain material. Furthermore, an application under the freedom of information act for the cost to the taxpayer of using Schillings to protect the blushes of CPS bosses was refused, er, "in the public interest". Initially the CPS said it was considering the return of the diaries but it now says it doesn't have them.

TAX AVOIDANCE

Offshore Alistair

JUST weeks after dismissing the Isle of Man as a "tax haven in the Irish Sea" when penniless savers in Icelandic banks operating there asked him for compensation, chancellor Alistair Darling now finds he owns a substantial business on the island.

With the acquisition of 57 percent of the Royal Bank of Scotland last month, the Treasury has bought up a significant offshore banking business headquartered in Jersey with operations in the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Gibraltar to name but a few tax havens. Then there are two businesses in the ultimate tax pariah state of Liechtenstein, RBS Coutts Trustees AG and Bank von Ernst.

Tax dodging through these operations was confirmed in 2007 when RBS was forced, along with other high street banks HBOS, Lloyds TSB and HSBC, to give the taxman details of UK customers with offshore accounts after they were officially estimated to have evaded £275m between them.

So will the government force RBS to wind up its offshore operations, in line with OECD secretary general Angel Guerria's widely welcomed statement last month that "we cannot expect taxpayers to fund the bailing out of failed financial institutions and at the same time allow these institutions to facilitate offshore non-compliance by using tax havens"? Don't bank on it. The new government body looking after the taxpayer's interest in RBS, UKFI, is chaired by Sir Philip Hampton. Until 2004 he was finance director of Lloyds TSB – one of the other banks found to have been helping customers evade tax through tax haven accounts.

Meanwhile, with Barack Obama set to sign a Stop Tax Haven Abuse Act in the US, some even dared hope that Darling might follow suit and put an end to tax havens depriving taxpayers of millions and facilitating the financial engineering that was instrumental in the financial crisis.

Alas, details of Darling's review of British "offshore financial centres" published last week dashed any such hopes. It will be led by FSA managing director from 1998-2004 (during which time many of the dodgy offshore structures were sanctioned), Michael Foot. Since retiring from the FSA, Foot has gone on to make a good living from the world's tax havens, first as inspector of banks at the central bank of the Bahamas and now as adviser to the Guernsey regulators on their handling of the Landsbanki and Northern Rock collapses. Foot's remit has also been watered down since the pre-budget report and will cover tax only as it affects "financial stability, sustainability and future competitiveness". Should ensure the tax havens are safe for another generation or so...

ACTIS/CDC

Tax and bend

AT THE recent United Nations development finance conference in Doha, warmly supported by UK International Development secretary Douglas Alexander, taxes were called "the platform for sustainable development".

Yet the *Eye* has discovered how the most profitable investment made by Britain's international development fund CDC, formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation, pays no tax at all, despite making very large profits.

For months CDC refused to give the *Eye* the accounts for its most important African subsidiary company – Tanzanian power company Songas – citing "commercial sensitivity". Only under pressure from Lib Dem shadow development secretary Michael Moore has it reluctantly done so.

In 2007 Songas made operating profits of $23.4m, up from $20m in 2006. Yet no tax was paid because of generous tax allowances for the depreciation of its investments that far outstrip the economic cost. The profits, meanwhile, disappear as dividends on "preference shares" held by two other companies within CDC's Globeleq power group: Globeleq Tanzania Ltd and Globeleq Somanga Ltd. The former is registered in Bermuda, the latter in Jersey. These companies in turn are owned by Globeleq Holdings (Songas) Ltd, a Mauritian company, itself under another Bermudan company, CDC Globeleq Holdings Ltd. The money eventually gets back up this chain to CDC in Britain tax-free.

The prospects for future contributions to the Tanzanian exchequer don't look great either. By the time the allowances are used up, the accounts reveal, the shares will have been converted into loans generating $20m a year tax-deductible interest payments that wind up in the tax havens.

Soon after the *Eye* (1205) first pointed out CDC's risibly low tax payments – 1.4 percent of its £365m profits in 2006 – its chief executive Richard Laing was challenged on the point on BBC's *Today* programme. "You own a number of companies registered in offshore tax havens and as a result you pay very little in tax to the governments of those countries where those profits are generated. How do you justify that?" asked reporter Greg Wood. Laing replied: "Well, actually that's not true. We pay a lot of tax in the local countries."

And a CDC spokesman told the *Eye*: "Songas has been given awards by the Tanzanian Revenue Authorities for its compliance history and good behaviour – though I doubt that this information will appear in any of your forthcoming articles."

PS: The bumper profits are good news for Songas's (average) 21 employees over the two years. They manage the business (while the plant is operated by a sub-contracting company) and earned an average $120,000 a year. Somewhat higher than Tanzanian per capita income of $250 a year.

Privates Collinson, James, Benton and Gray

DEEPCUT

Draft dodging

WHATEVER happened to the army board of inquiry conducted last year into the death of 17-year-old Geoff Gray, the youngest and third of four recruits to die of gunshot wounds at the Deepcut barracks?

The inquiry, which heard extraordinary allegations of murder against a named soldier, was expected to have been published by last Christmas. Instead a draft has been circulating among the higher echelons of the army and Ministry of Defence for well over a year.

Last week the board suddenly reconvened to hear "additional evidence" from Colonel Ron Laden, who had become commanding officer at Deepcut a few months before Geoff Gray's death, and who had asked to make changes to the draft report. For the Gray family it was all a bitter disappointment.

Whatever happened to the four recruits (whether suicide or worse), their deaths came about against a backdrop of dangerous malaise within the British army training system. The glaring problems at Deepcut, with its culture of bullying and neglect, were not addressed and raw young recruits were left vulnerable.

Two years ago Laden had told the Blake inquiry into Deepcut that he had been put in charge of a "sink" regiment. It is clear from that report that he – unlike his predecessors – had stamped down on the rampant sexual activity and excessive drinking that had blighted the base. In fact his bosses at the Army Training and Recruitment Agency thought he was being too harsh. He also got rid of several errant non-commissioned officers and made stringent efforts to find useful activities for recruits who in the past had become bored while awaiting postings to other units.

However, some of the crucial problems at Deepcut, including chronic understaffing which at its worst saw one corporal to every 100 recruits, were outside his control. At night, when staff went home, that ratio could reach 1:300. Indeed, many of the concerns Laden raised with his superiors had fallen on deaf ears and he was therefore anxious that the draft report reflected this.

Laden, now working in the US and flown over for the hearing, was hampered, it seems, by not having been given a draft of the full report, containing all the footnotes that might have answered his concerns. But if he found the procedure difficult, for Geoff Gray's parents it was incomprehensible. They have not been shown a draft on which they might comment before the report is finalised, so when the board agreed changes to pages and paragraphs they didn't have a clue what was being discussed.

Their son was found with two gunshot wounds to the forehead, one above each eye, in the early hours of 17 September 2001. He had been on guard at the officers' mess and went on a lone patrol. A few minutes later shots rang out. An inquest into his death recorded an "open verdict" and the family are not expecting the board to make any other findings. Coming so long after the event, evidence from a former lance corporal that he believed a recruit had shot Geoff Gray may be flawed. But Mr and Mrs Gray were so shocked by the claim they immediately alerted Surrey police. They were told these were "old" allegations which had already been investigated and dismissed as part of the force's earlier investigations.

The army board inquiry heard nothing else to support a murder claim. Ballistics experts could not say whether it was murder or suicide. As *Eye* readers will be aware, basic forensic procedures were ignored at the time and crucial evidence lost. And no one has explained one of the most troubling aspects: why the weapons log, which would have shown which soldier was allocated which gun, was removed from the armoury that night and later shredded.

Even if the inquiry ends up shedding no new light on how Geoff Gray came to die, at least Laden's concerns that the buck does not stop with him indicate that for the first time in this long and sorry saga, an inquiry is about to decide there are some people who are finally to be brought to account for the scandal that was Deepcut.

NHS I.T.

Computer says 'dough!'

WHEN most experts were calling for the disastrous project to be pulled, how did the failing programme to upgrade the NHS's IT systems (*Eyes passim ad nauseam*) get a £1bn boost in February this year, news of which emerged only this autumn?

The main beneficiary of the "reset" negotiations between the Department of Health agency running the programme, Connecting for Health (CfH), and the IT firms was contractor BT. The company's deal to develop the national "Spine", on which patients' medical records will be stored and moved around the country, was originally valued at £620m but was "reset" to precisely £1bn – a 61 percent hike. BT's woefully behind-schedule contract as "local service provider" across London, meanwhile, was increased by £86m to £1.08bn.

Health minister Ben Bradshaw insists all the extra dosh is for extra work, but it is still mighty handy for BT, which is paid by results and so is spending far more than it earns on the NHS IT work. The man BT has to thank is CfH's "programme director" in charge of the Spine project from May 2006 to April 2008, Martyn Smith. Negotiations leading to the £380m uplift for BT on the Spine and the £86m on the London deal concluded in March 2008 and were, according to CfH, "undertaken by a commercial and legal team with operational information supplied by Mr Smith".

With the job done, Smith quit the programme for a well-earned six-month sabbatical. Suitably refreshed, where should he crop up on his return to the lucrative world of healthcare IT in October but at… BT! Smith now runs the company's work on the NHS London contract he so helpfully inflated.

PS: Smith provides his services through tax-efficient service companies. He originally worked for Connecting for Health through a firm called i3it, but when this was bought by BT in 2006 he left in order to continue working for CfH on BT's contracts. But rather than go on the government payroll, he provided his services through another service company, EHS Consulting, with whom he remains while working for BT.

PPS: Smith co-owns EHS Consulting with Neil Taylor, another BT consultant who shot to fame when he was handed a suspended prison sentence three years ago for faking a degree on his CV in a (successful) application to become chief executive of an NHS trust.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

2m Unemployment figures predicted for UK by Christmas

2m Unemployment figures when Labour elected in 1997

FLOOD RELIEF

Lock shock

THERE were celebrations along the Thames last week as the Environment Agency finally gave up on its batty plans to sell off riverside lock houses and replace experienced lock keepers with webcams (*Eyes* 1210-1212).

Six months after insisting that resident keepers were no longer needed because "telephones and cars made communications and getting around [easier]", the agency announced that keeping the lock houses was "the sensible way forward to enhance how we manage the river as safely and efficiently as possible" (which was what everyone had been telling it all along).

But as residents along the Thames cheered, there was bad news for those along the River Hull, where a new flood risk management scheme from the Environment Agency proposes to withdraw maintenance of flood protection, while four pumping stations have been deemed "uneconomical" and will be decommissioned. Instead, a vast area of farmland is to be earmarked for flood water storage and farmers will be left to plug any holes in the riverbank themselves.

Farmer John Duggleby, who is chairman of the local internal drainage board, described the plans as "totally unworkable", a terrible waste of prime agricultural land and a pollution risk. "The Environment Agency seems determined to move away from traditional ways of managing our rivers and watercourses – methods that have worked for generations," he said.

ACADEMY SCHOOLS

The Ruth hurts

YET MORE trouble at Southampton's Mayfield Academy where, as the *Eye* revealed, since Christian group Oasis took over the secondary school, the bus shuttling teachers across sites failed to turn up, a pupil protest turned into a "rampage" and around a quarter of the staff resigned.

Steve Chalke, the "inspirational" leader of Oasis (pictured), responded to charges of "inexperience" with a letter to the *Times* Educational Supplement arguing "we are proud to have experienced principals leading the academies, including Ruth Johnson, our principal at Oasis Academy Mayfield". Not any more, they don't: Johnson resigned at the end of November. This leaves a big hole at the centre of Oasis strategy, which relied heavily on Johnson, who had real experience of pulling another Southampton secondary school out of special measures.

Meanwhile in Staffordshire, 450 worried parents crowded into a meeting to discuss plans for a new academy backed by the Landau Forte Trust. "Hands off Tamworth Schools" is fighting the plans, which would involve closing the successful QEMS high school and turning it into a sixth-form centre, while Woodhouse School, which is in special measures, would be turned into an academy. The would-be sponsors – a trust run by Rocco Forte & Family Ltd (*Eyes passim ad nauseam*) and the Landau Charitable Foundation – already run one academy in Derby.

The two-hour meeting held at QEMS was part of the traditional perfunctory "consultation" process. Parents complained that the meeting didn't even get through all their questions and many believe the meeting was just "going through the motions" for the council. But while their parents are struggling to get answers, pupils from across the county have already enjoyed a very different form of consultation. Education bosses took the youngsters on days out to Drayton Manor amusement park to, er, gather their opinions about the future of education in the county. Now that's being taken for a ride!

In the City

FRAUD FIESTA

"THE public no longer believes that the legal system in England and Wales is capable of bringing the perpetrators of serious frauds expeditiously and effectively to book. The overwhelming weight of the evidence laid before us suggests that the public is right."

That was the ringing denunciation from Lord Roskill's 1985 Fraud Trials report, which gave birth three years later to the Serious Farce Office. The SFO was established to investigate and prosecute "serious or complex fraud": frauds that existing arms of law enforcement were incapable of or unwilling to tackle because of that very complexity or the cost associated with wide-*ranging inter*national investigations. These would often be cases with a higher than normal risk of failure – either no trial or acquittal.

The SFO's own criteria point to the type of cases that it takes on: "Cases likely to give rise to national publicity and widespread public concern. These include those involving government departments, public bodies, the governments of other countries and commercial cases of public interest; cases requiring highly specialised knowledge of, for example, Stock Exchange practices or regulated markets; cases in which there is a significant international dimension; cases where legal, accountancy, and investigative skills need to be brought together."

Fast-forward 20 years from its inception…

On 6 October the SFO announced it had done a deal for contractors Balfour Beatty to pay £2.25m to cover accounting irregularities regarding suspected bribes relating to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina library contract in Alexandria, Egypt. This was the first example of the SFO's wish to copy the US Department of Justice policy of deferred prosecution agreements with companies who volunteer information about overseas corruption. But the US fines are usually much bigger in return for no trial and the DoJ not spending years on an investigation.

The Balfour Beatty joint-venture contract was worth almost $120m, so the fine is petty cash. But as Balfour Beatty volunteered information about the suspect payments in 2005, it got off cheaply even after a three-year investigation.

On 26 November the SFO proudly announced that it and Scotland Yard had made five arrests in relation to an online ticket fraud which had ripped off clients who had bought tickets for the Beijing Olympics and several music festivals. The scale of the fraud was not revealed, but consumer fraud is now an SFO priority.

On 3 December the appeal court finally killed the SFO's longest-running and most expensive prosecution – over price fixing of generic drugs supplied to the NHS by five companies, three of them multinationals, and nine present or former executives. The NHS has estimated its loss from the price fixing as at least £100m between 1996 and 2000.

The SFO was appealing the decision of the trial judge that the prosecution was legally flawed. The SFO had charged the defendants with conspiracy to defraud because of their dishonesty and deception of the NHS. The trial judge had initially accepted that the case could proceed and that decision had been upheld on appeal, but in March the law lords told the SFO it had to amend the charges to show "specific aggravating elements" in the NHS fraud to elevate price fixing to conspiracy to defraud and so get round the fact that price fixing and cartel behaviour was only made a crime in 2003. However, the amendments were not accepted by the trial judge, Mr Justice Pitchford – whose reasons cannot yet be reported – and the appeal court refused to overturn that decision and has yet to say why.

For the SFO this looks like another hole below the waterline, with the defendants crowing and expecting to recoup millions in legal costs while the SFO's own costs are expected to be around £20m. Whether, however, four of the companies would have paid £34m to settle civil proceedings on similar evidence brought by the NHS without the SFO prosecution is open to severe doubt.

There can be little doubt which of these cases and outcomes Lord Roskill would have envisaged justified the £40m a year – twice what it was in 2000 – that it costs to run the SFO, as the NHS case was funded separately by the Treasury. But whereas the NHS case began in 2000, the Xclusive online ticket investigation was launched by the new SFO director Richard Alderman, who has a very different view as to what the SFO should be about from his predecessors Ros Wright and Robert Wardle, who persisted with the NHS case.

"Grey Man" made no secret within the SFO of his lack of enthusiasm for the NHS case. Insiders suggest he wanted to drop the appeal and even sought backing from the attorney-general, Baroness Scotland, and the SFO's non-executive directors for that decision. Only in the face of mass opposition within the SFO – on the grounds that the prosecutors could not be seen to give up without trying to overturn the trial judge's decision – did he agree that the appeal, already filed, should go forward.

But there is no disguising that after the dropping of the BAE/Saudi case two years ago, and the failure in September of another major fraud trial after a multi-million-pound, five-year investigation – the jury could not agree on a verdict for the two main defendants, who are to be retried, and acquitted a third – the future of the SFO is even more in doubt than after the withering, "not-fit-for purpose" verdict of the De Grazia review published in June.

That future is likely to be plunged into even more jeopardy if, as is expected, the last big-ticket SFO investigation – into bribes paid by British companies to the Saddam Hussein regime to get business in Iraq – is dropped and there are no meaningful prosecutions from the continuing BAE investigations over bribes paid for arms orders from South Africa or the Czech Republic. There are also investigations over bribes paid for deals in Tanzania and Romania. The expectation is that the BAE cases – and probably also Iraq – will all be settled *à la* Balfour Beatty as part of a deal by BAE with the US justice department to pay a large fine in return for no prosecution.

The Alderman approach, as indicted by the Xclusive probe, is to go for "quick wins". This strategy was set out in an internal presentation given to SFO staff. Dated 8 September, the document is headed "The Way Forward" as "One SFO" and contains "Richard's Message" on "making it happen" to his demoralised staff. It bears all the trademark management speak – "expert domains", "stakeholders" – of the several consultants and spin-doctors Grey Man has hired since taking over in April: PA Consulting, on a contract worth £859,000 plus expenses and VAT; Corven Consulting, at a cost of £660,000-plus; City PR firm Luther Pendragon for £6,000; and former BBC reporter turned PR man Sam Jaffa for £180,000 a year, less the fee paid to recruitment specialists Adecco.

The "High Level Plan" shows a flow chart which states how, by 1 October, the SFO would have developed a strategy and an implementation plan. Part of this plan was to "implement quick wins" by the same date; then, between October and April Fools' Day, the end of Alderman's first year in charge, to "implement overall new SFO model… design new operations structures… implement new structures and build capability in operations… communications and engagement". No mention of jailing bad guys.

And what is this "new SFO model"? Well in the proposed "Future Functional Model", out go the tired old operational divisions with their experienced prosecutors, and in come four exciting new departments: Assurance; Outreach; Operations; and Capability and Planning, to be run by (Assurance) Kathleen Harris, (Outreach) Bob Evans, (Operations) Phillippa Williamson and (Capability) Linda Thorpe. Evans is the former admin chief while Williamson, like Alderman, arrived from Revenue & Customs along with five seconded officials. The other two heads have had previously very low profiles, even within the SFO.

Assurance is aimed to deliver internal quality control regarding "our in-house and customer-facing work", Outreach to "raise our profile with stakeholders" and build relationships, while "Capability and Planning" will be a "one-stop shop for all transactional administrative activities".

"Flexible case management" has also seen the abandonment of the six-division structure used to handle cases and a reversion to the pools of investigators and lawyers which is so new that it was used when the SFO was created!

Meanwhile, exciting new recruits are expected. Hopefully these appointments will be more successful than that of a former senior police officer, who it was belatedly discovered had too much baggage, including a lost libel case over allegations of a bungled high-profile investigation.

Morale has not been raised despite the spin associated with Alderman's new model, due to incidents such as the refusal to allow several SFO staff to attend a debate at the British Institute of International & Comparative Law last October. Entitled "Back to the Future: Revitalising the SFO", it was addressed by both "Grey Man" and Jessica de Grazia as well as David Kirk, director of the CPS Fraud Prosecution Service (with which

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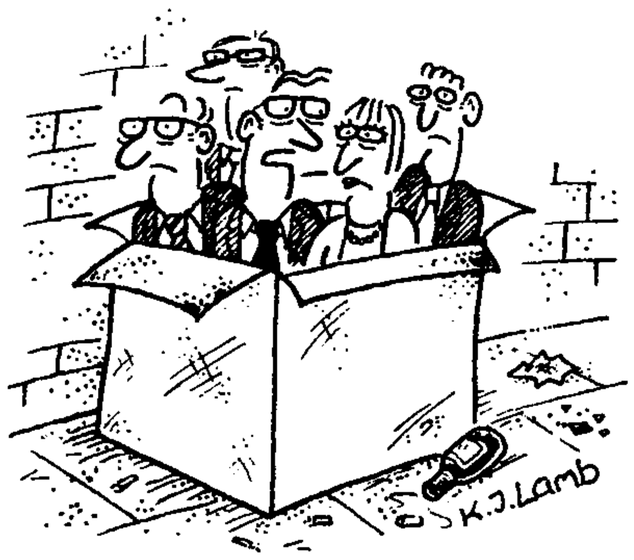


"The corporate box isn't what it was"

some believe the SFO could be merged) and Andrew Baillie QC.

Training requests to attend the debate were rejected by Thorpe and Williamson – perhaps wisely, as a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. One questioner – a former SFO lawyer – asked Alderman to state what he saw as the purpose of the SFO and its future. The answer was not convincing, according to those present.

Another concern relates to Alderman's decision to dispense with the operational management and combined management boards created by his predecessor. These were designed to ensure the operational and administrative heads met regularly and with the three non-executive SFO directors, who otherwise only served on the strategic management board. Alderman has replaced the two committees with the "Senior Leadership Team". While the combined management board met at most four times a year in 2006 and 2007, the operational management board met eight or nine times in each year. The strategic management board – which insiders say lacks the insight from operational experts – is now the key committee and is dominated by Alderman appointees. It meets usually monthly – and met in September to decide on what to do about the NHS case. This was seen by some as an attempt by Alderman to obtain backing from the non-execs to drop the appeal.

Some former senior SFO sources suggest that dropping the two boards removed needless talking shops. But others see it as concentrating too much power with the director Alderman, whom they already accuse of not being open or communicative or even involved with cases.

The fact that morale is so low within the SFO at a time when it faces so much criticism over its failings encourages those who see Alderman as steering the SFO towards either a dumbed-down but more successful version or a merger, either in whole or in parts, with either the CPS or the Serious Organised Crime Agency.

Alderman has been engaged in a PR campaign addressing meetings with lawyers and City figures about his vision. The reaction has been unimpressive, according to those who have heard him.

The SFO is looking to the government's plans for US-style plea-bargaining to boost its success rate. But judges have expressed their concerns by stating that they do not trust prosecutors like the SFO to cut the right deals in return for guilty pleas. And outcomes such as the NHS case are highly unlikely to persuade defence lawyers to advise clients to rush to plead guilty when there is such a good chance that either the trial will collapse or the jury will not convict.

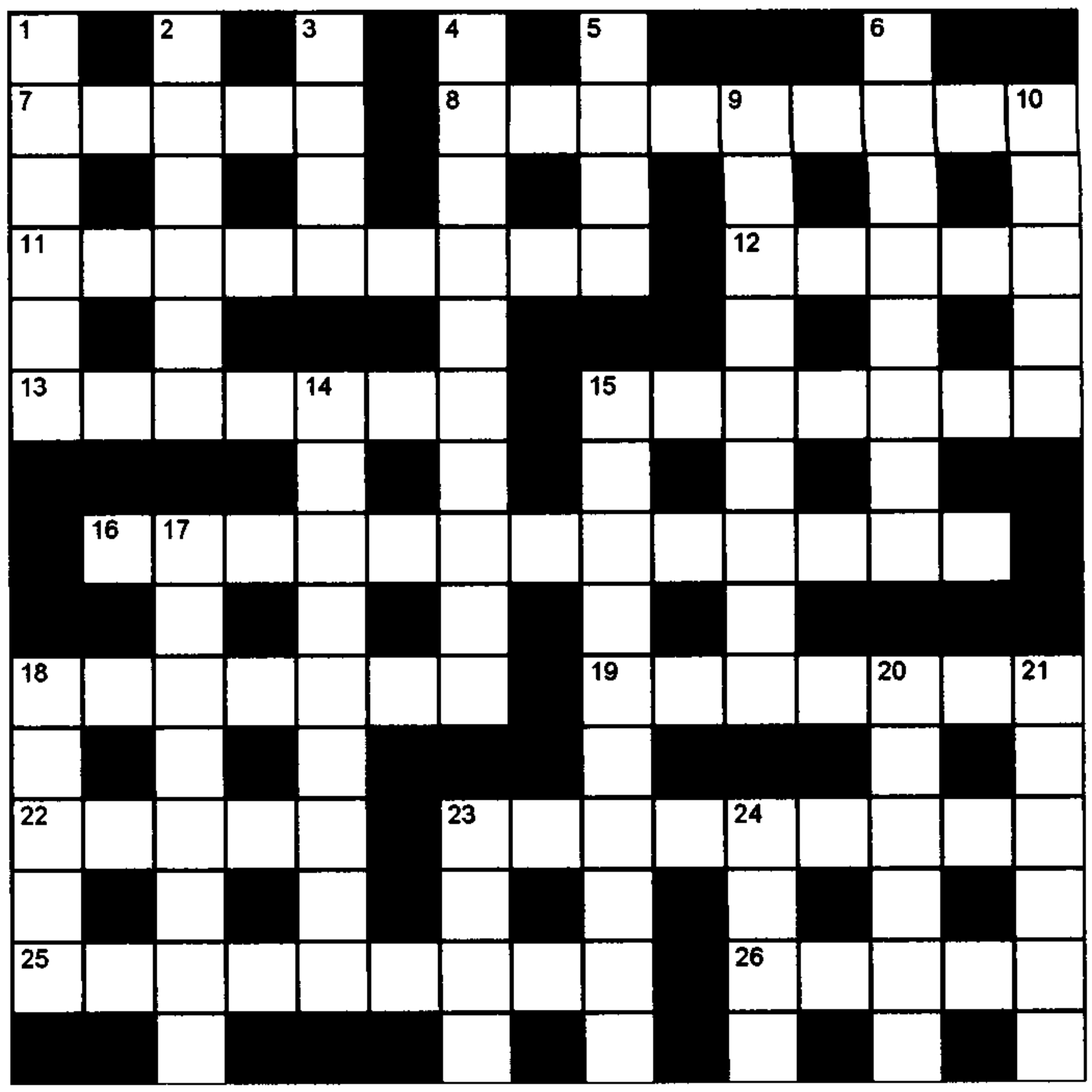
But at least the City can be assured that the Alderman New Model SFO is determined to become "fit for purpose". In October, staff were issued with a pedometer to achieve this goal, along with an invitation to a series of "two-hour interactive training sessions" from Linda Thorpe "chief people officer".

A Lord Roskill, like De Grazia, might well look at his pedometer and instead consider it was time to produce an organisation that was "capable of bringing the perpetrators of serious frauds expeditiously and effectively to book".

'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 380

by Cyclops



£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 17 December 2008

Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk

ACROSS

7 Tabloid elected to back a religious adherent (5)

8 Attlee's chief whips secured crude oil for "Fortress city" (9)

11 Worldly type's organ: long, kept in bag (9)

12 Local energy source of stress for Bush (5)

13 Pisspot stink about Sting's opening number (3,4)

15 Blunt dogs politician but head not given (7)

16 It's a pleasure to have touched base finally with plastic surgeon Zoe outside Ontario (9,4)

18 Prat's back in no. 10, possibly a concession to oldies? (3,4)

19 Leader of Tories more sensible to take Tony's lead, getting spin-merchant? (7)

22 Mandelson at centre – embraced by jittery "sir"! – with time to engage once again in parliamentary business (5)

23 Poor Wat's ho-hum solution for a foul-tasting hole? (5,4)

25 A crumby snack put a stop to urge (6,3)

26 Maybe Donald's temperature dropped, seeing arses (5)

DOWN

1 Out with Labour, predominantly in the keeping of a drip (6)

2 Out of control hen party (skirts removed) to perpetrate a tabloid sting? (6)

3/15 Pissed by palace attendants? Try being "one who rules"! (4,5,5)

4/23 Applying pressure to bums to "come across" – not what a lot of banks have been any good at? (6,4,4)

5 See 24dn.

6 Tainted outcome of being given head by one whose aim is poor? (8)

9 Celebs are usually brassed off with their images (9)

10 Bold as brass at first, Sarah Palin's behind the demise of probity? (5)

14 Giving some corgi a stick is like group sex (9)

15 See 3dn.

17 It impedes the reinvention of Tories (outside of South), right? (8)

18 Follower of Ken, elevated Nick, "has a life" (5)

20 "Skirt half concealed by belly on Grade" shock (6)

21 Once again fashion is about taking a drug (6)

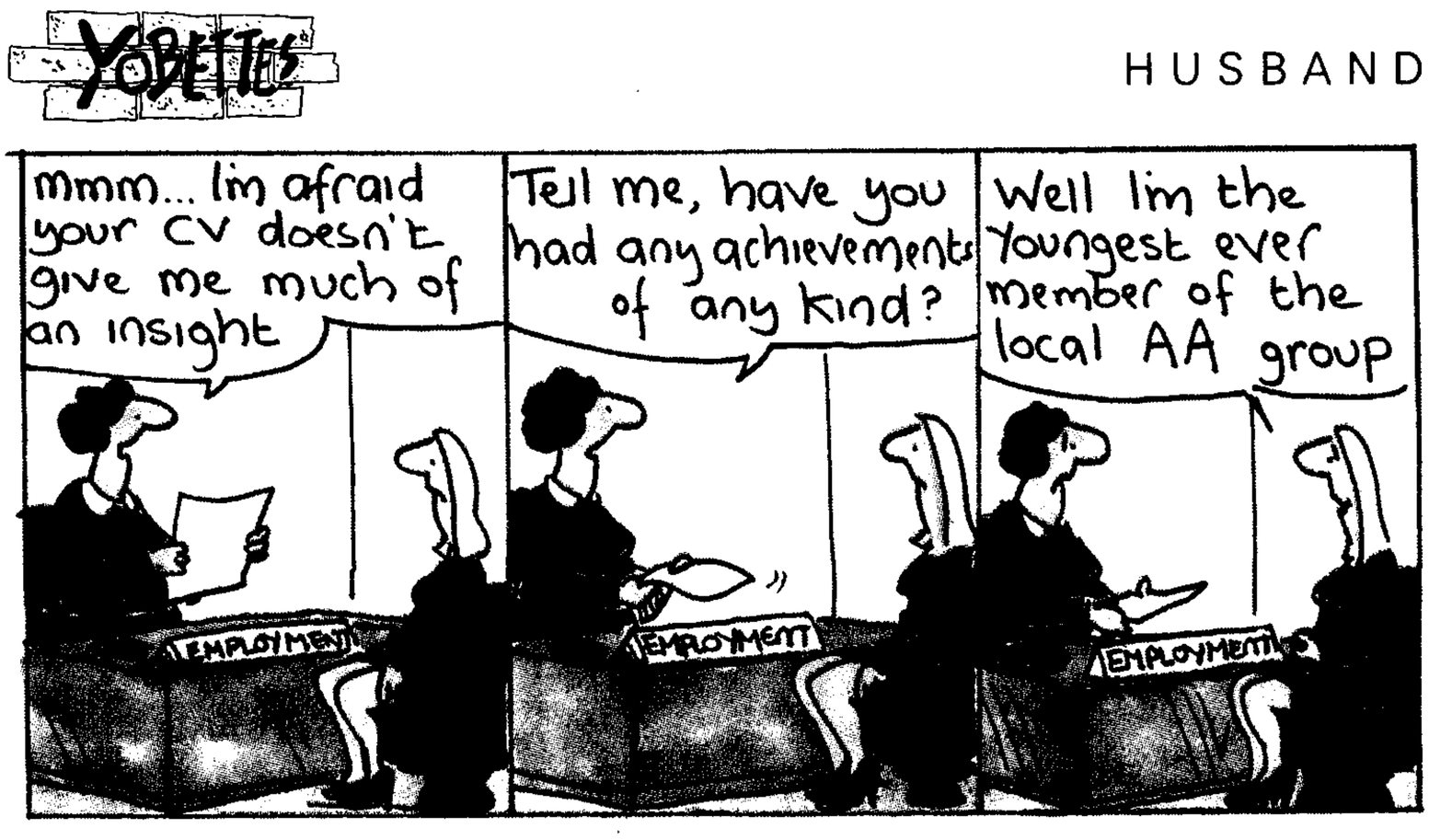
23 See 4dn.

24/5 Viagra? It's dangerously addictive (4,4)

Crossword 379 winner: DAVID PUGH

ACROSS: 1 Humbug 5 Ferocity 9 Buffoon 10 Jargon 11/12 As safe as houses 13 Immunity 15 Racist 16 Lapdog 18 Fitted up 20 Alarmist 22 Effigy 24 Unmask 25 Abdomen 26 Lashings 27 Martyr.

DOWN: 2 Unbosom 3 Bafta 4 Glowering 5 Fantasy 6 Rajah 7 Carbuncle 8 Trowels 14 Under oath 15 Rotterdam 17 Atlanta 18 Fat cats 19 Urgency 21 Ink in 23 Femur.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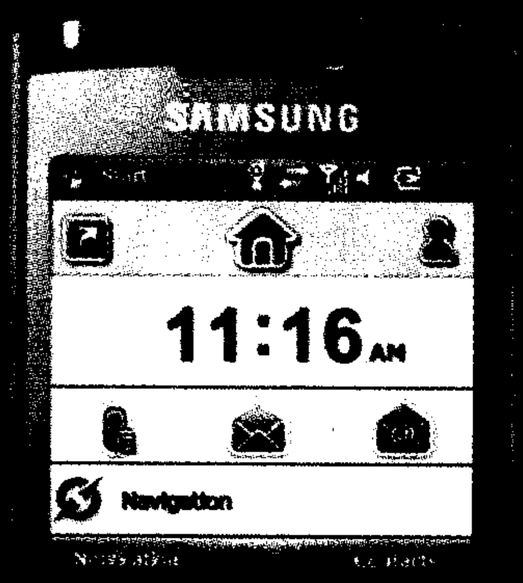

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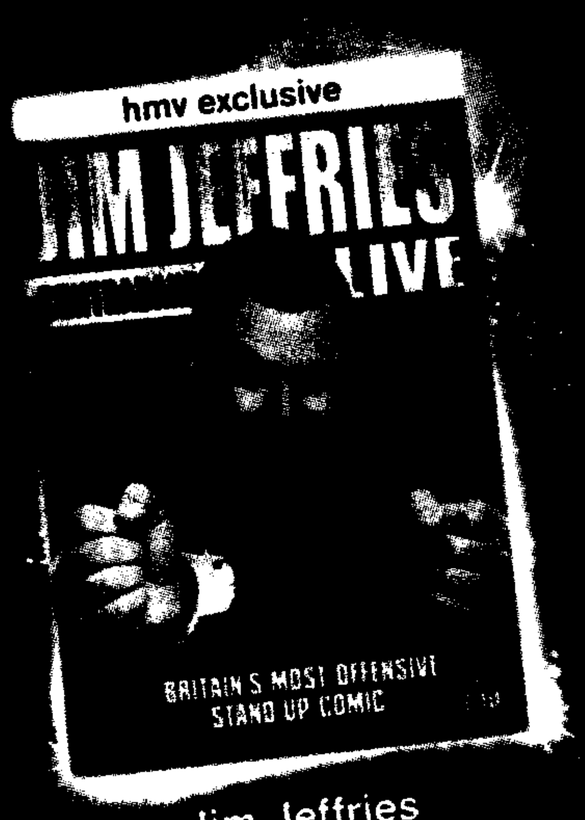

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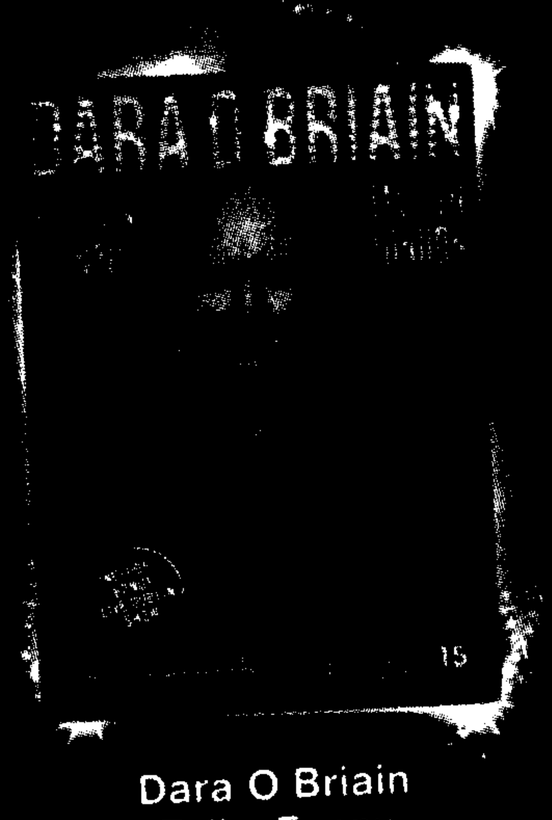

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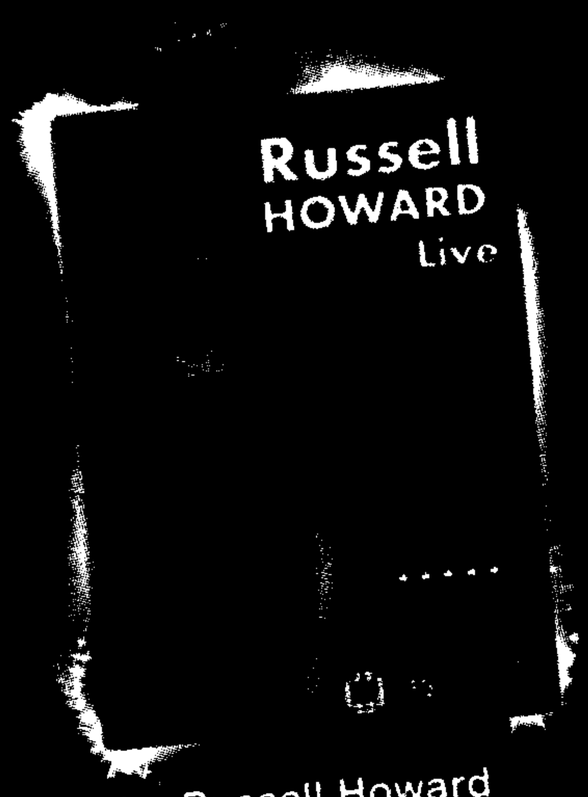

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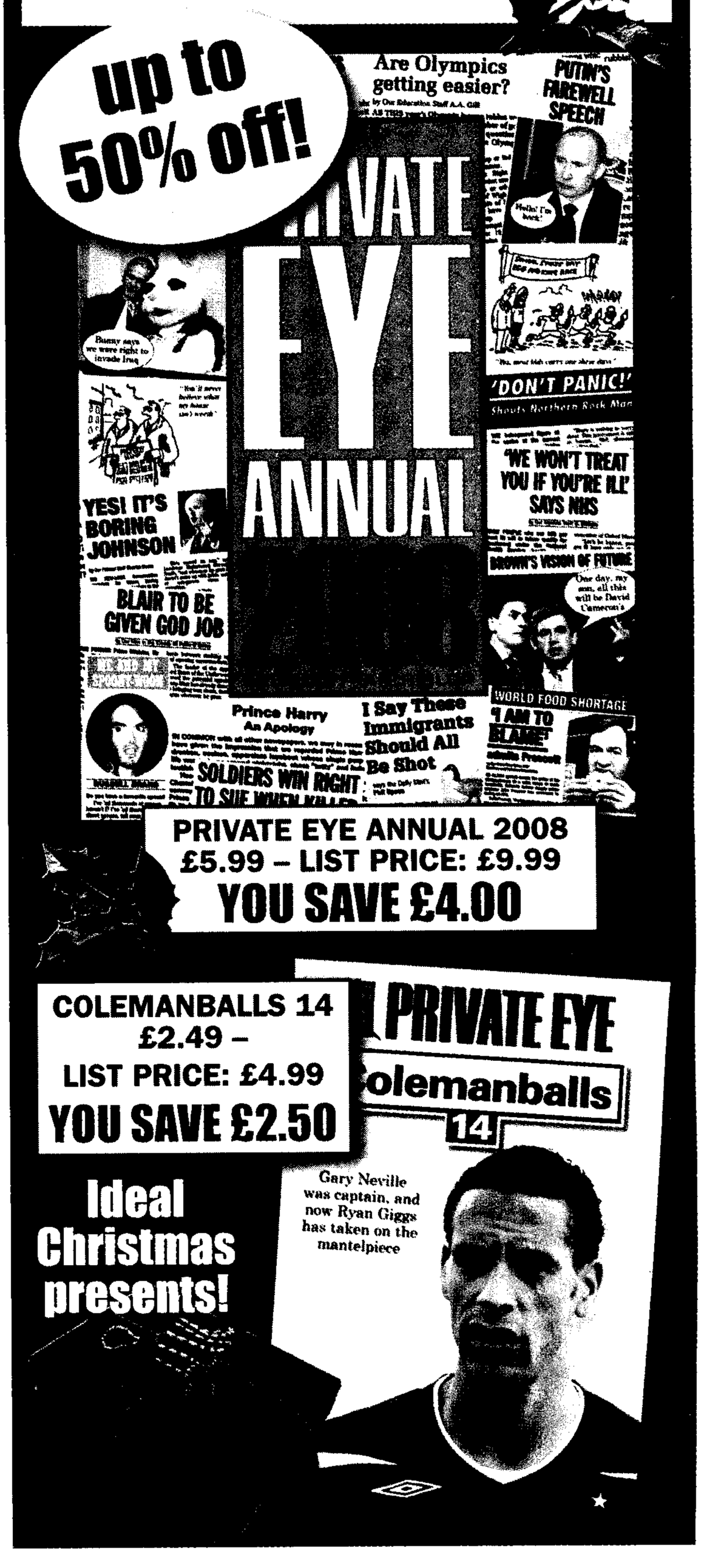
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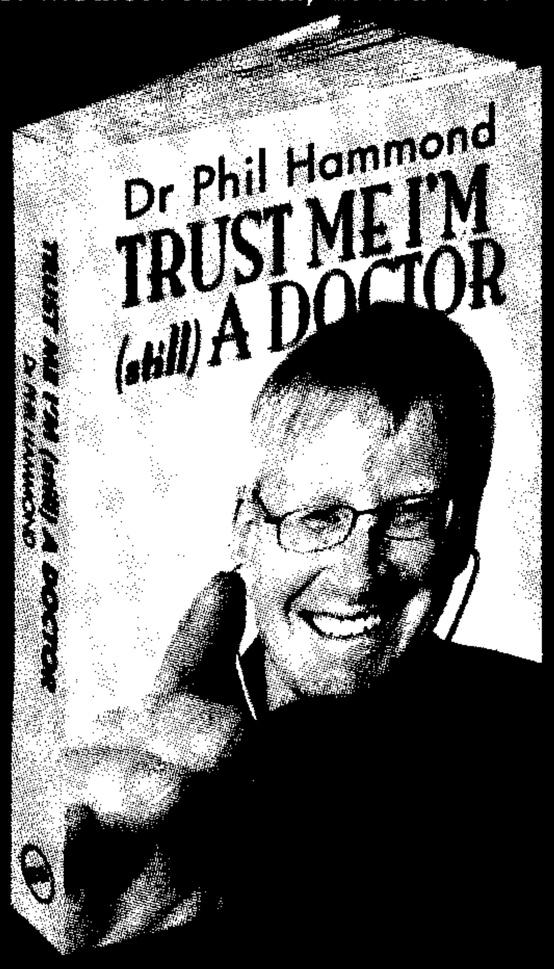

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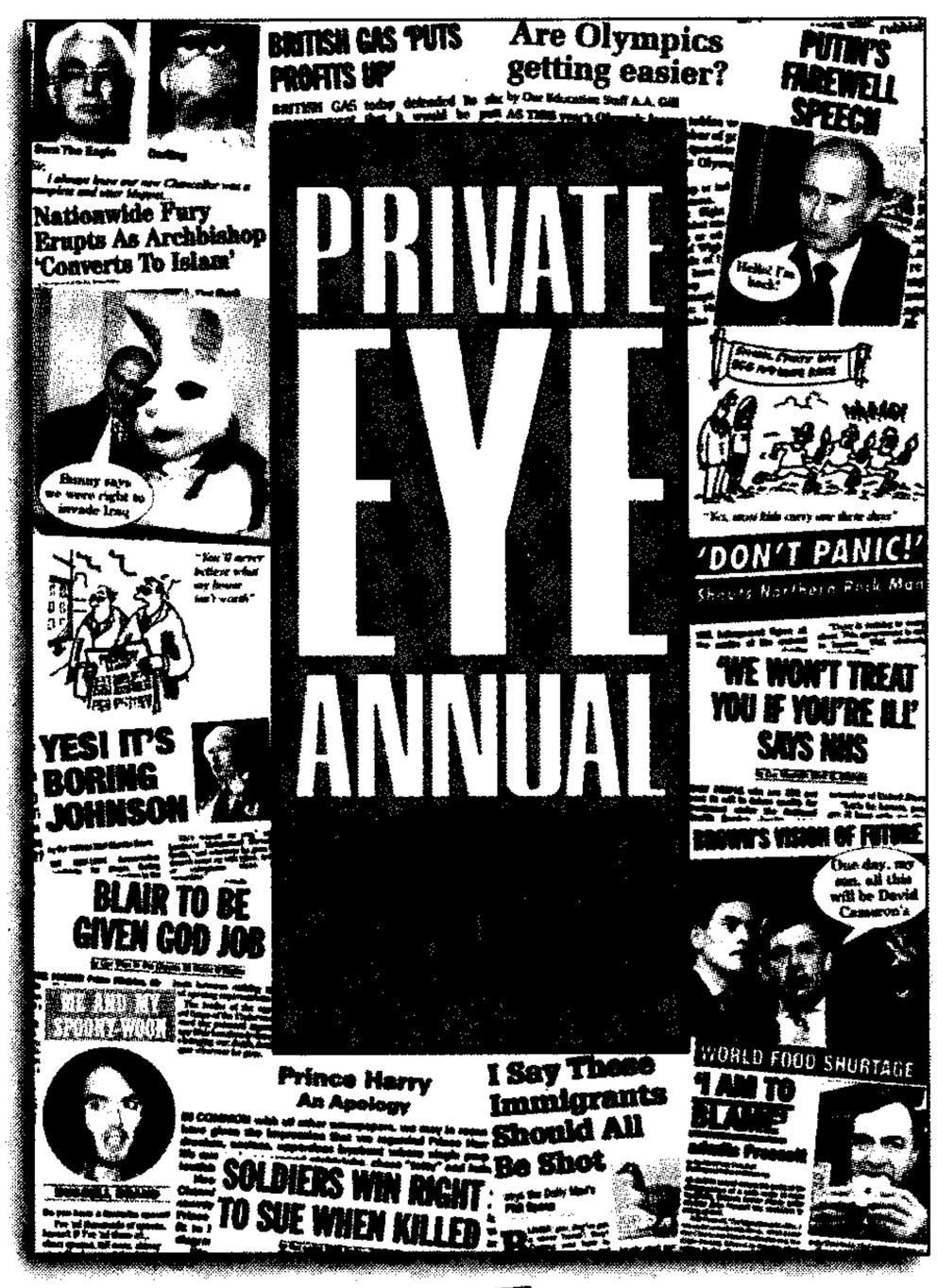
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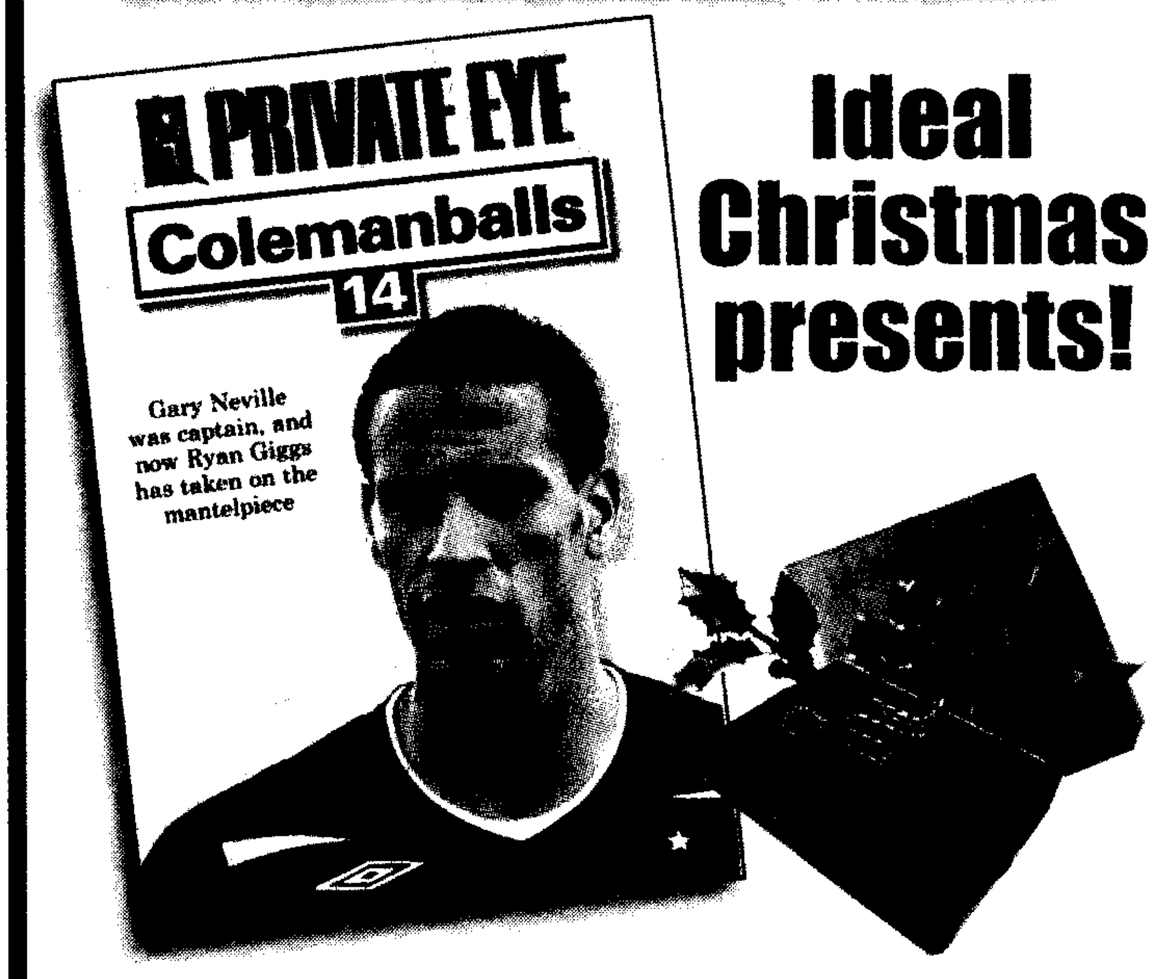

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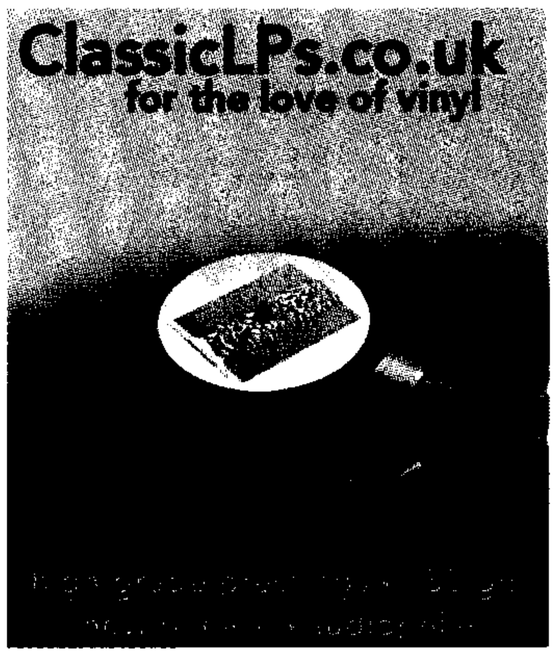

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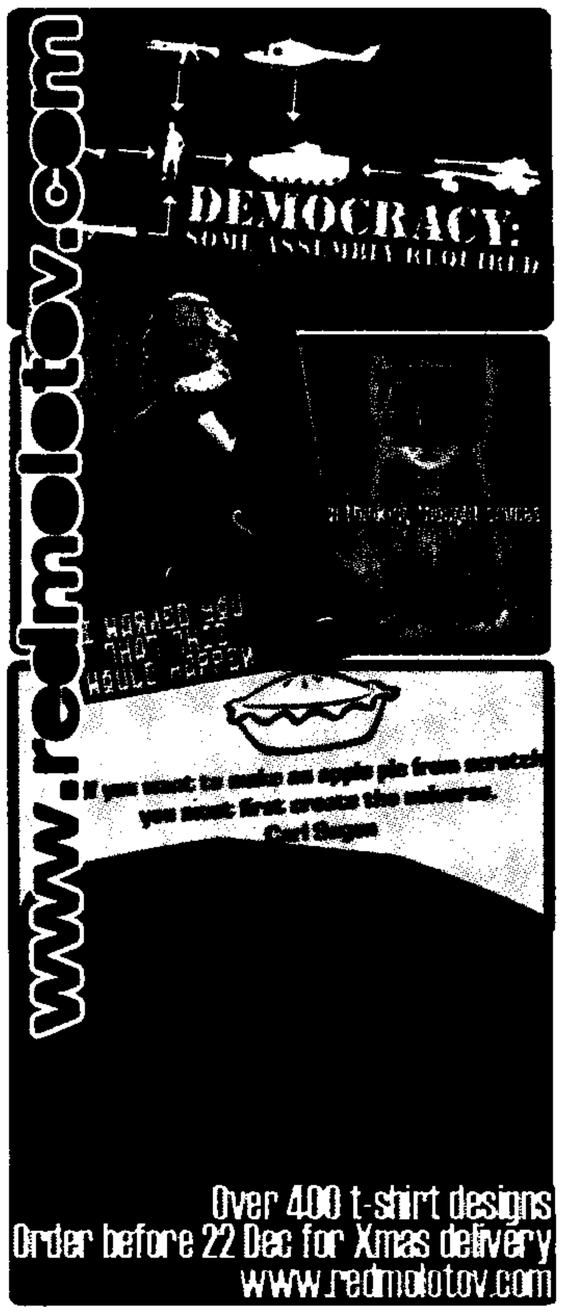

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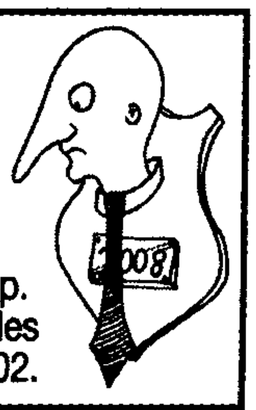

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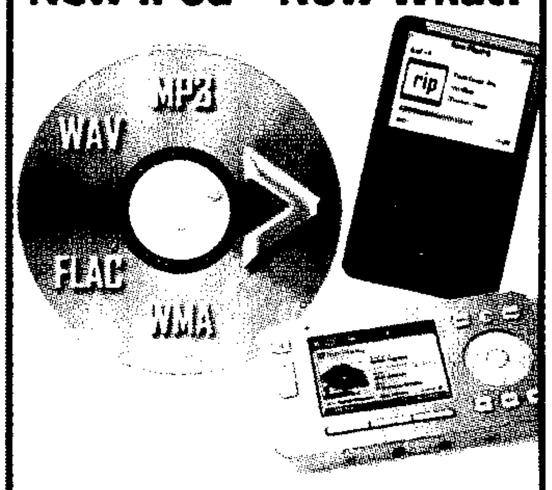

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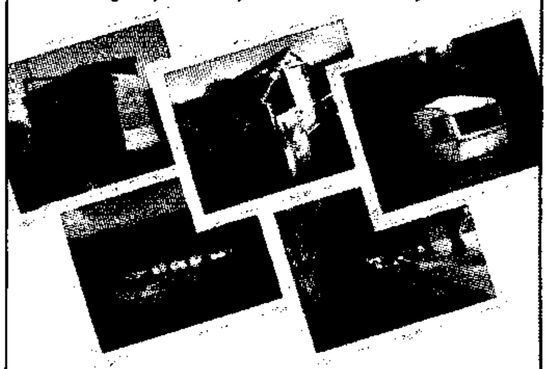

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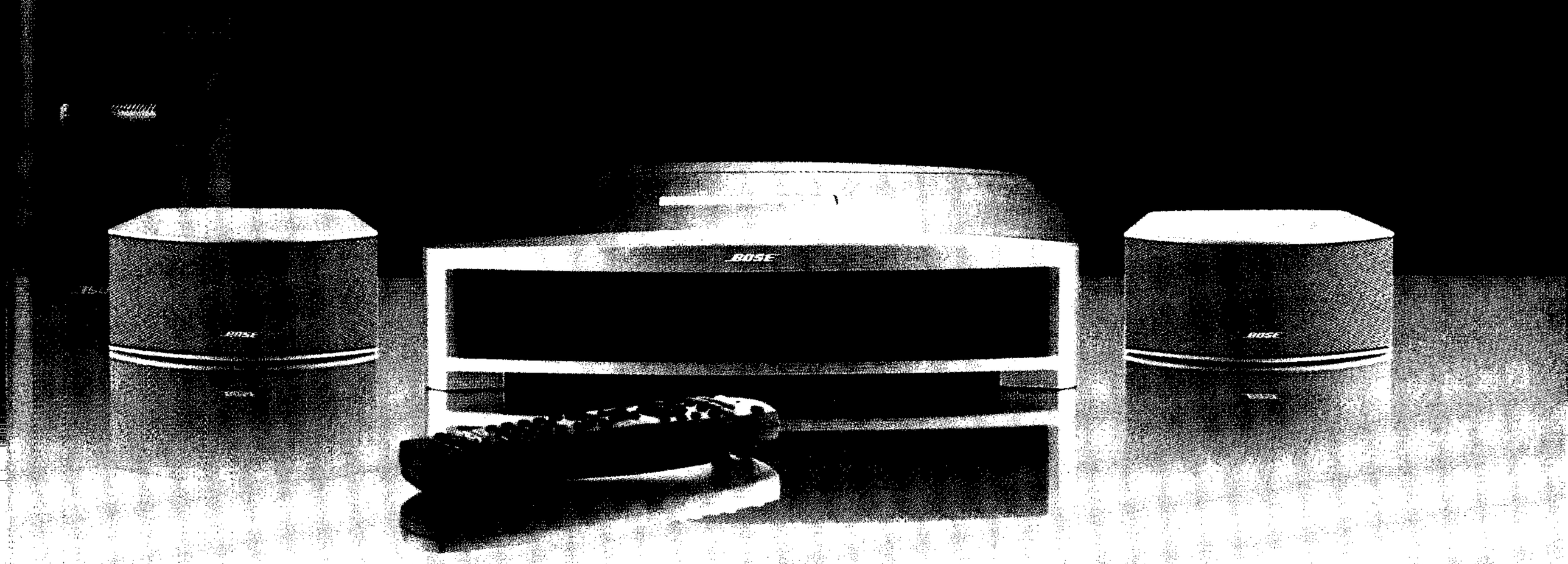

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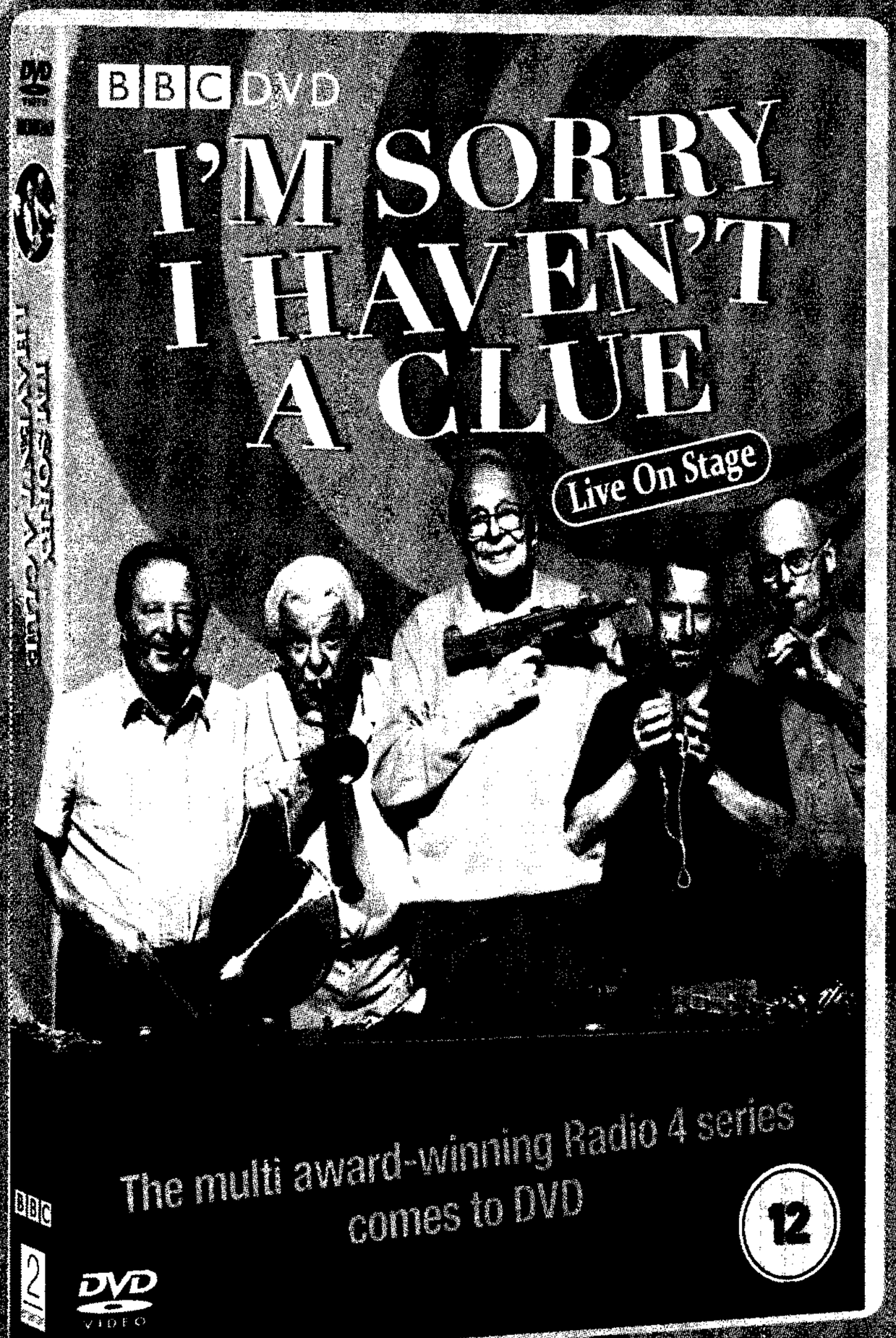

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